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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

LULWATER

CHAP.	PAGE
I THE LAKE	vii
II ISOBEL ERNE	xvi
III FAREWELL	xxx

LONDON

I THE MARRIAGE OF CECILIA ERNE	37
II THE MARRIAGE OF LAURA ERNE	45
III ISOBEL ALONE	56
IV MRS. BENJAMIN REUBEN AND MRS. ARTHUR WELWYN	70
V ISOBEL'S SECOND MEETING WITH HESKETH	85
VI PASSING TIME	102
VII A NIGHT AT THE REUBENS' HOUSE	112
VIII AN ORDEAL	123
IX THE COMEDY OF A WILL	136
X ISOBEL, HER FATHER, AND AUNT ALTHEA	145
XI SWIFT LOVE	156
XII BEGINNING WITH A LETTER FROM LULWATER. ENDING WITH AN ELOPEMENT	167
XIII ONE DAY—AND HOW IT ENDED	177

CHAP.		PAGE
XIV	THE FLIGHT	186
XV	ROSEGLADE AND ISOBEL. THE DEATH OF HENRY ERNE	197
XVI	A QUARREL	207
XVII	THE FAILURE OF LAURA'S JUDICIOUS PRESSURE	218
XVIII	HOW JOE HESKETH HEARD THE NEWS OF ISOBEL'S ENGAGEMENT	234
XIX	THREE YEARS AFTER. A TALK AND A RETROSPECT	239
XX	EBB AND FLOW OF ISOBEL'S MARRIED LIFE	253
XXI	HOME	261
XXII	GATHERING THREADS TOGETHER	270
XXIII	LULWATER	279

PROLOGUE

LULWATER

CHAPTER I

THE LAKE

LULWATER mirrored the sunset of the last and most beautiful day of August, eighteen hundred and ninety two. Thirty years ago.

It was the end of a flaming month, hot, slumberous, scented. Summer, heedless of the breath of autumn in the evening air, held her own in widely spreading, leafy trees, golden bracken, mosses and grass. A mist, half concealing the range of distant mountain peaks, was rent and torn by shafts of light as it drifted over the head of Lulwater—flame-red clouds, far flung from the west, the colour intense beyond words, glorious and awful to behold.

The lake was as still as a magic mere, spell-bound, giving a reflection of hills and trees and the heavens, unchangeably perfect in its every change.

Lying in a long, winding valley, Lulwater was like a gem in a rugged setting, surrounded by fells and moorland, with uneven fields sweeping down to its edge at one place, a pebbly waste of beach at another. There were narrow promontories jutting into shallow water; an island, dark and drear with its tangled undergrowth and old firs; another which was entirely over-shadowed by the branches of a single oak.

The great trees at the head of the lake had been cut down, to show the full length of its beauty. Lulwater held the secret of all charm—suggestion, mystery, illusion—and was rarely seen without its silvery mists, haze of soft rain, and wind-swept clouds low hanging over the hills, darkening and hiding the water.

Not a breeze stirred in the air on the last and most beautiful night in August, as the fires of heaven burned and died away. The long sweep of a heron's flight above and below the lake, reality and reflection equally perfect and passing, was the only movement in sky and water.

* * * * *

There was one boat in view, as still as a leaf, with no drops falling from her lifted oars; a wide, old, weather-beaten boat. A well-known boat for twenty years in her own little world, her name is to be found in the annals of Lulwater; she is praised in published letters, and, although her voyages are over and it is long since her keel slipped into the water for the last time, she is not forgotten.

Rest, old Arrow—wofully misnamed!—in the shelter of the little harbour of Lulworth House, high and dry on the shore, listening to the lap of little, windy waves, the rustle of leaves, and the drip of rain. A smoky gondola—more wofully misnamed still!—puffs from end to end of the lake in these days, and tourists stare up at Lulworth House from her crowded deck. A steam launch, always in a hurry, darts out of the sheltered harbour instead of the rowing boats of older and happier times. A steam launch is an ugly water fowl, squatting low and without wings.

There were two figures in the motionless Arrow, a girl at the oars, a man in the stern. They were rapt in the beauty of the hour, silent, thoughtful, in perfect repose.

He was not a very old man, but his short grey beard and straggling grey hair gave an impression of age. He was bare-headed, his long, thin frame stretched at idle ease, with elbows resting on the back of the seat and feet crossed.

The girl was little more than a child in years. Her dark hair was cut in a fringe that hid her forehead; it was straight, soft hair, inclined to curve inward at the nape of her neck, but even then in an unbroken line, like the hair of a page in a Florentine picture, with no little dusky rings, pretty wisps, tiny curls.

Her face was pale, clear-skinned, with an austerity of outline in the features—too regular for absolute beauty—that was softened and saved from hardness by the finely shaped mouth, ripe in colour as a shadowed raspberry, with generous lips, but not too full. Her eyes were set rather wide apart under straight brows; moody, melancholy eyes, sombre in thoughtful minutes, rarely gay, shadowed with pride.

The plain dress she wore, a white jersey over a blue serge skirt, showed the undeveloped lines of her youth; she was as lithe and vigorous as a boy in the poise and ease of her whole bearing, with her bony little hands and wiry wrists, and her strong feet in low-heeled, square-toed shoes.

At the same time there was little of a boy's lack of self-consciousness. She was childishly, innocently pleased with herself and the knowledge that her companion, when the rapture of the sunset was over, would look at her long and earnestly in its afterglow. Her straw hat shaded her face. She took the opportunity to slip it off, holding the oars with one hand for a minute, without turning her gaze from the fiery skies.

* * * * *

The shafts of light began to fade into yellow gold. The torn edges of the veil of mist drifted together. The mountain peaks darkened. A sudden wind stirred in the trees on the near shore.

"Row on, Isobel!" said the man in the boat.

Reluctantly and slowly the girl dipped the oars and pulled a long stroke.

The water rippled in a myriad circles from the dripping blades, widening and widening until the whole mirror of the lake was changed. The reflected shores quivered and were blurred.

The wind, at the same time, escaped from leafy branches and rushed over the water, whipping it into tiny waves that broke noiselessly on the pebbles and whispered in the grass.

"Pull in shore, my darling. We're in the middle of the lake," said the man.

Isobel obeyed him and rowed on steadily.

"Lulwater is as capricious as a girl," he continued ; "Pull with the left. That's all right. The wind is against us. This lovely day may end in a stormy night."

"Are you frightened of the treachery of the lake, Mr. Strang ?" she asked, heading the boat towards the little harbour of Lulworth House.

He smiled at the emphasis she put on the adjective.

"No, but I feel too lazy to row and if we were caught in a squall I should have to take the oars."

"Indeed, no ! I could pull the Arrow through any squall," said Isobel.

"Do you think so, pet ?"

"Sure of it."

She quickened her stroke, for the wind was still blowing over the water and the waves were beginning to ruffle against the sides of the boat, making it toss a little.

Isobel rowed well for a London girl. Until she went to Lulwater, in the middle of July, she had only sat in the stern of a boat on the Serpentine in Hyde Park, on an occasional Saturday afternoon, for a single hour of pleasure and anxiety. The pleasure was in the lure of the water, the sight of it shimmering round her, the cool touch of it slipping through her sensitive fingers as she held her hand over the side, the sound of it in the plash of the blades. The anxiety was in watching the oarsmanship of her father, which was of a kind to provoke mirth from the banks and rage from the other boats. Eccentricity of action may be an interesting quality on land ; in a small craft on water it is too alarming to look upon with a peaceful mind.

On the lake at Lulwater it was as easy to manage a boat—such a boat as the old Arrow with pins to steady the oars—as to walk along an empty road. Before her small hands had lost their first blisters, Isobel could row across the water and back again without fatigue, leap into the boat as she pushed her off, and beat Godfrey Strang himself in a race (but she always doubted whether he had done his best).

Isobel stopped rowing when they were within a hundred yards of the little harbour. She leaned forward, her

face slightly flushed with exertion, her eyes luminous with a sense of happiness.

"This is the end of the most wonderful month in my life!" she said.

Isobel had a low voice, even in tone, rarely so thrilling and melodious as it sounded as she spoke these words. If she had been able to sing, she would have been a contralto.

"Your whole life!" repeated Strang, smiling, but with no hint of amusement at her young solemnity. "My dear child, your life is nearly all before you, but I'm glad you have the grace to be so earnest in youth, so serious in thought and emotion during the morning of your days."

"I am always serious," sighed Isobel.

"No, no, not when you're climbing apple trees, or dancing in the woods, or chasing our wild cat," he said, beginning to laugh at her. "Don't be so solemn, my dear—just solemn enough to set me right when I'm too lively."

"You said you would like me to be earnest and serious," she protested, glancing over her shoulder to guide the Arrow into the harbour.

"Yes, when you're choosing ivy to make yourself a crown, or listening to my lectures. I've never met such a pretty girl who could look so tragic!" he broke off, at a change in her expression. "What is the matter now?"

"I suddenly remembered that the last day of August is nearly over. A few short hours before it ends and we say 'good-night'."

"And a few happy dreams and it will be the sweet month of September, and we'll say 'good morning'," retorted Strang.

"Must we really go in now? I don't think it will be stormy after all."

"Dear, we must. I have to write some letters before dinner."

"I wish I could be in London for an hour and then, perhaps, you would be writing to me, Mr. Strang. But just as you were sending the letter to be posted, I'd fly back again and we'd read it together."

"Do you know, that's a very pretty speech, little one? I think I must write you a note while you're changing your frock and send it upstairs hidden in a bunch of roses . . . be careful how you turn into the harbour—pull left—a little faster—one more stroke, steady—that's all right. Capital! Let me take the oars."

The girl stepped on the front seat, balanced herself for a second and jumped lightly out of the boat. Then she helped him to pull the Arrow higher on the pebbles, tugging at the chain with all her strength. Strang laughed and protested.

"You should let me do the hard work, pet," he said; "what else am I here for?"

Isobel looked at him questioningly. Whenever he spoke to her as a woman, not a child, she was vaguely puzzled. They stood for a few minutes under the trees, looking towards the lake. The mist had thickened, hanging low over the fells, but the sky was still aglow.

"If you are ever really old, like me, I hope you'll sometimes think of Lulwater as we have seen it to-day," said Godfrey Strang. "Whatever time may bring to you, of shadow and storm, remember the joy of your youth in the glory of the sunshine, the majesty of the hills, the murmuring sound of water."

Isobel put her hand in his and leaned her head lightly against his shoulder.

"I haven't been able to teach you much," he went on, "for I thought it better to let you run wild, but you have learned enough of painting to make you wonder at others' work and more than enough of poetry to give you delight."

"Those things are not at all like lessons, Mr. Strang."

"My dear girl, if you can still wonder and still feel delight, when you are old, you will have learned the greatest of all lessons."

"Isn't knowledge greater than wonder, and experience better than delight?" she asked.

"True knowledge and deep experience should only add to wonder and intensify delight."

"But if one is doomed to be unhappy?" said Isobel.

Strang allowed himself to laugh at her for the first

time, and, putting one finger under her chin, turned up her face to look at it.

He was surprised at himself. Was it possible that this moody girl, so young, so ignorant, so inexperienced, could have filled his days with her companionship for more than a month? What was her lure? Beauty? Promise? Unconscious charm? The woman awaking in the girl? All of these qualities, perhaps, but more than all, a strange attraction in her personality—her very self—that captured his imagination.

As he looked into her eyes, still smiling, Strang was entranced by her expression—expectant, listening, gazing—like a wood nymph startled to silence when she was all alone.

For one minute he clasped her in his arms, not as a man holding a living woman to his heart, but as one who embraces a lovely stranger in a dream—youth, enchantment, the unattainable—swept by emotion too subtle and evanescent for waking hours. He did not kiss her, but touched her forehead with his closed lips. The fading light gave an illusion of finality to the passing time.

“Shall I ever have you at Lulwater with me again, Isobel?” murmured Strang. “It is such a short time since you came and now you are going away.”

“I feel as if I had been with you for years and years!” answered the girl.

She was quite passive in his arms, at rest, utterly happy.

“Has it seemed so long, my dear?”

“Endless!”

He smiled at her frank avowal, not following her thought.

“I mean all the days have been so perfect that I remember every one. They’re not confused together. They’re like a string of pearls. I can hold each one of them in my hands.”

“Can you hold memories in your hands, child?”

“No, but in my heart forever!”

Strang was amazed at her words and the thrill of her low voice, and, as he still looked down into her eyes, the girl’s face changed. The tension broke, a quiver passed over it like a wave of water, closing her lids and

moulding her lips into the slightest, most appealing smile of a child.

Strang released her instantly. His own expression was the same, but he could not control the blood that leapt into his weather-beaten, wrinkled face. He felt a subtle stab of self-reproach.

Isobel stood immovable, such a little creature in her short skirt and white jersey, watching him pick up the cushions thrown out of the boat. All her own energy was gone. She was suddenly pale and weary.

"Come, darling! It is nearly eight o'clock," he exclaimed, looking at his watch.

Isobel began to drag herself up the shelving bank towards the garden of Lulworth House, listlessly dangling her hat in one hand. He looked at her anxiously.

"Are you so very tired, Isobel?"

"Yes."

"Why did I let you row me so far?" he said, angry with himself.

They slowly reached the wall dividing the uncleared land that bordered the lake from the grass slopes of the garden. Isobel put her foot on the first stone step to climb over, leaning one hand on Strang's shoulder. As a rule she refused his help in scrambling over walls and fences.

"Poor darling!" he exclaimed; "You're as wan as a faded white violet. Let me carry you home."

He threw down the boat cushions, gave her both hands to climb to the top of the low wall and then took her in his arms.

Isobel did not speak. She laid her head down upon his shoulder and he felt her forehead and soft hair pressed against his neck.

She was very light. He carried her as easily as he would have carried a lost child, without talking, for he thought she was falling asleep. Her eyes were half closed, but beneath the dark fringe of her lids she saw the strip of green lawn, the hazy outline of distant flowers.

While she was conscious of his long stride and the firm, but gentle, grasp of his arms, Isobel was possessed by a sensation of ecstasy, so young in its utter forgetfulness of any time beyond the present, so untouched by

any thought of sex, that it was both spiritual and consummate.

Strang carried her along the winding path that skirted the little wood, through the garden, round the east side to the door of Lulworth House.

"Awake, dear! We are at home," he said.

Isobel raised her head and looked at him, almost faint with silent, trembling emotion. Then she turned her face away and kissed his cheek, so softly and lightly that he knew, rather than felt, the touch of her lips.

"That's sweet of you, Isobel!" he exclaimed, putting her down and opening the door of the house; "Now, run along upstairs and put on your pretty green dress and an ivy wreath. I must write my letters."

Isobel slowly took her way up the old fashioned, wide staircase, waving her hand to him before she disappeared.

Godfrey Strang turned into his study, but he did not sit down at the writing table. He threw himself into an arm chair by the window, looking across the garden towards the darkening lake.

He was saddened and troubled, for a few minutes, by the recurrence of half forgotten thoughts and desires of his earlier years; faces he had known and loved grew out of the shadows of his mind, with the echo of sweet voices and the seeming touch of hands.

Then he sighed, smiling a little at himself too, and reached for the pile of unanswered letters.

CHAPTER II

ISOBEL ERNE

THE girl named Isobel Erne stood in front of a mirror in the chief guest room at Lulworth House.

Mrs. Clare, Godfrey Strang's sister who kept house for him, had intended to give such a very young lady a less important apartment, but Strang had interfered.

The big windows of the chief guest room overlooked the lake; there was a narrow casement in the adjoining dressing room facing the west; he wanted the London girl to be able to watch the sunsets. Mrs. Clare shrugged her shoulders and gave orders for the room to be prepared for Miss Erne. She privately thought the invitation rather ridiculous, and said so to her husband.

"Let us be thankful, my dear, that it was not extended to the girl's papa and mama," rejoined Mr. Clare.

"Are they very hopeless, Edwin? It was you who took Godfrey to their—place of business."

"Shop," corrected Edwin, bluntly.

"What is the woman like?"

"The mama?" Edwin pondered a minute before observing slowly; "I should say Mrs. Erne is a good illustration of one of Moore's love songs——" and Mr. Clare whistled "Believe me if all those endearing young charms."

"Is she so very young and pretty, Edwin?"

"On the contrary, I meant that 'around the dear ruin' each wish of Mr. Erne's heart entwines itself verdantly still. At least, I hope so."

"Describe the woman properly, Edwin," said Mrs. Clare, impatiently.

Her husband pondered again.

"Tall, black-browed, with altogether too much anatomy about her."

"What do you mean by that?" cried Mrs. Clare, more impatiently still.

"Bony type of beauty, my dear."

"How was she dressed?"

"I don't know about the skirt part," said Mr. Clare, wearily; "The top looked like a sheepskin mat."

"Why in the world did Godfrey ask the daughter of such a person to come here?" exclaimed Mrs. Clare.

"Your brother Godfrey resembles Providence. His ways are inscrutable," sighed Edwin.

So Mrs. Clare had somewhat dreaded the advent of Isobel Erne. Having had no sisters, nor children of her own, she had never taken an interest in young girls, and she knew that Godfrey, if Isobel bored him, would expect his sister to amuse and keep her out of his way. Fortunately Godfrey had not been bored, the little girl behaved prettily, and, as she was very silent, Mrs. Clare concluded she was rather stupid, called her "dear one," and never thought about her when she was absent.

She would have been considerably surprised to know that Isobel, during the first two weeks of her visit, had observed Godfrey Strang's sister very closely and longed to win her affection. She little knew how the delicate tints of her dresses, her beautiful jewels, her faded, ash-coloured rolls of hair, white skin and pale blue eyes—she was like a cream tea rose when it has been gathered a couple of days—had simply fascinated Isobel.

She was quite young enough to be ready to give Mrs. Clare affection and admiration, but her girlish enthusiasm was checked and died away in the obvious indifference of the older woman. Even the caressing repetition of "dear one," though it delighted her at first, meant nothing after she had heard Mrs. Clare use it in just the same tone of voice to a neighbour's pug dog.

Isobel never liked Mr. Clare after she had seen him mimic Strang behind his back. It was good-naturedly done, Strang himself would have laughed and applauded, but Isobel was angry and hurt. She showed it by sitting bolt upright, hands folded, severely solemn. Edwin did not improve matters by saying that she reminded him of an anecdote of Queen Victoria, who

greeted a comic story she did not like with the sentence :—
“ We are not amused.”

Occasionally there were people invited to dinner—very rarely, for Strang was an unsociable fellow—and then Isobel was keenly aware of her unusual position. If they did not show surprise at a silent, short-frocked girl being the guest of the house, she knew they felt it.

At this time she was almost painfully sensitive and shy, but even Strang never suspected it. Always looking self-possessed, she was too proud to show her feelings, and behaved as if she had been accustomed to meeting strangers at dinner parties.

As a matter of fact an ordinary dinner party, until she went to Lulwater, was an event as far from the experience of Miss Erne as a State Banquet.

At first she had been secretly embarrassed, even when she was alone with Mr. Strang and Mr. and Mrs. Clare, by the number of knives and forks she was supposed to use. But observation taught her what to do with them, added to the recollection of “ Hints for Social Aspirants ” in a book belonging to her mother. “ Everything should be taken with a fork,” being the first hint, the writer thoughtfully adding “ with the exception of soup,” before a final word of grim warning to social aspirants :—“ It is offensive to others, and dangerous to yourself, to put a dinner knife far into your mouth.”

The ease and comfort of Lulworth House charmed and amazed her. It was so wonderful to come downstairs, perhaps as late as nine o'clock, and find the breakfast ready and the whole house in order—no fire to light in the kitchen, no sweeping or dusting, no shop to be opened. The food was delicious, piping hot ; toast, honey, cream, fruit ; and when she had finished she could stroll away without giving a thought to washing up the dishes.

There were stories and poetry to read ; all the flowers she cared to gather ; the Arrow lying in the harbour when she wanted to row ; a darkling, captivating little wood beyond the garden ; the ever-changing clouds and the mysterious hills to dream of, and, ten times more than ten times all, Godfrey Strang to talk to her, walk

with her, show her his rare books, teach her to draw, lead her into a new world of imagination.

* * * * *

Isobel, standing in front of the looking glass on the last night of her stay, realized how absolutely she had banished London from her mind for six weeks. Six weeks ? They seemed to be like six months, or six years.

She had long grown accustomed to her surroundings. The house and big garden, lake and fells, were better known to her now than the house and narrow yard, streets and dusky roofs, of the sixteen years of her former life. If it had not been for the letters she had received from home, and forced herself to answer, she would never have thought of her people—even her beloved sisters—at all.

It was not selfishness in Isobel which made her ignore her home in thought ; it only meant that she was obsessed by the spirit of Lulwater. The present, pulsing hour absorbed her. In her most silent moods, when Strang believed she was lazily at rest, her whole being was receptive. All her senses were at their keenest. She was admiring, wondering, questioning, enjoying beyond words, even in repose.

She looked at her own reflection in the mirror with much of the impersonal admiration of an artist studying a model. Her best dress—made by her sister Cecilia, badly sewn, tacked together—was green cashmere, with long sleeves of peacock blue velvet, a velvet belt and collar.

Isobel liked the colour of her frock, but she had a secret longing for a small waist. It was the period of hour-glass waists. She had tightened her belt when she first came to Lulworth House, by altering the hooks and eyes, and tried to improve her figure (as she thought) by folding a silk handkerchief and several scarves across her little chest under her frock. But the effect, studied in profile before the looking glass, was a disappointment. She had locked the door before attempting this aid to beauty and pulled it out again with hasty fingers, as if someone had caught her in the act.

Isobel thought she had changed as she looked and looked at her grave face in the mirror on the last night.

It was true. Her eyes were so dark and lustrous, her skin so kissed into glowing colour by the wind and sun, her form so erect and well poised with the lightness of hours in the pure air, that she looked like a different girl. Her fatigue had passed away when Strang lifted and carried her in his arms.

She ran downstairs, before the gong sounded for dinner, to wait for her host in his study. His letters had been written. They were lying on the hall table, square big envelopes, addressed in his fine, clear hand.

Isobel passed into the room, leaving the door open and being careful to stand where he would see her silhouetted against the uncurtained window. She noticed a couple of books on his writing desk, bound in blue morocco, and touched them with the tips of her fingers, having learned to love the feel and scent of beautiful bindings.

She turned slowly on hearing Strang's step. He was in evening clothes, with an old-fashioned, finely tucked white shirt, and wore a scabious in his buttonhole which Isobel had picked for him in the afternoon.

Few men of sixty are as strong as Godfrey Strang was at that age; if it had not been for his grey hair and beard he would have looked fifteen years younger. Exceptionally tall, he stooped a little, but his gestures and movements, the tone of his voice, the sound of his rare laugh, were all expressive of fine health and balance. The brown of his skin, tanned and wrinkled, made his blue eyes appear singularly light and brilliant.

In his youth he had been as fair as a Norseman with yellow hair, as all who know his picture in the National Portrait Gallery, at the age of twenty three, can see. It is one of the finest works of the greatest portrait painter of the nineteenth century. In Isobel Erne's time it hung in the drawing-room at Lulworth House, but she hardly cared to look at it. The living man, however lined and old, was of far more interest than any picture of a lovely boy.

"Hail to the ivy-crowned!" exclaimed Strang, standing still at the door; "What shall I do to-morrow

night when my study is empty and I have nobody to scold for rowing too far?"

"I'm sorry you haven't finished all your letters," said Isobel.

"I did! I did!"

"Not all, Mr. Strang."

"All, Miss Isobel."

"No. Where is the note you promised to send to me hidden in a bunch of roses?"

He laughed and clapped his hand to his forehead.

"The roses had gone to sleep and it seemed so cruel to pluck them out of their dreams. Wait till the morning, Isobel."

She shook her head decidedly.

"I don't want to take any flowers from Lulwater back to London. That would be cruel if you like."

"I meant to give you all you cared to carry, dear."

"No. They would begin to fade directly after I had said good-bye," rejoined the girl; "I don't want to take anything home except my happy thoughts. I'd rather leave Lulwater and Lulworth House just as I found them, then they will be exactly the same when I come back."

"Next year!" said Strang, gaily.

"I—wonder—" she murmured.

"You must come back next year in the spring, if we can manage it. I want to see you in the wood among the primroses and anemonies—but there's the gong, and I can hear my sister's voice."

He offered his arm to Isobel, with a certain formality which had at first embarrassed, and now pleased her.

She had grown accustomed to the oddity, as it had seemed, of dining in the evening, even later than the hour when they had supper at her home.

Isobel was delighted with the oak-panelled room in shaded candle-light; the flower-decked table; the old English cut-glass; the Coalport dinner service with its quaint birds and blossoms circled in yellow; the silver-handled knives; the finger-bowls with petals floating in clear water—the feeling, above everything else, of kindness and long leisure.

Mr. and Mrs. Clare had lived with Strang since their

marriage. It was an arrangement which gratified the lady, enabling her to share in her distinguished brother's popularity when she could induce him to go to London, and do as she pleased in his house at Lulwater. She entertained a great many of her own friends, and a few of his, with graceful hospitality.

A shrewd woman, for all her apparent mildness of temper and gentle ways, she had long made herself indispensable to Strang. She saved him petty annoyance, managed the household cleverly, and studied his moods until she had become a past-mistress in adapting herself to them.

Mr. Edwin Clare was perhaps not quite so well satisfied as his wife. He never said so, but the brother-in-law of a celebrity who lived in the same house, however amiable and generous the latter might be, was bound to feel over-shadowed at times.

Everybody liked Edwin Clare, but without enthusiasm. He was humorous on occasion, never high-spirited. He worked harder in the garden than any of the gardeners, read, smoked, played chess for Strang's diversion and the piano for his own, talked politics, visited his neighbours, and slept a great deal.

"If dear Edwin would only exert himself——!" was a favourite, unfinished sentence of Mrs. Clare's, suggesting great possibilities if he only would, but years slipped by making no difference—except in weight—to her dear Edwin.

Isobel Erne looked upon him as a middle-aged man, but he was still in the early forties. He liked the girl, secretly envying his brother-in-law's power of winning confidence. She was as great a stranger to himself and his wife on the last, as on the first, night of her visit.

Mrs. Clare wondered whether she was glad or sorry to leave Lulwater. She had expressed regret in words, but her young face struck the older woman as singularly tense, almost blank, in its self-control. Even Strang failed to move her to mirth or frank response. If she had not looked so very pretty her hostess would have thought her insufferable—the little sphinx—but Mrs. Clare always admired and acknowledged beauty.

When the dessert was on the table and the wine placed in a silver decanter-stands before Strang, in the old time fashion that he liked, the talk drifted to Isobel's home—London, not the house where she lived. Strang harped upon the London of his boyhood. Edwin Clare displayed an unexpected and intimate knowledge of Southwark and Eastcheap. His wife did not know he had ever been there. He answered her string of questions with the single remark:—

“My dear, it was before your time.”

Mrs. Clare then grew enthusiastic over modern London.

“I expect your affection for the old place is bounded by Kensington Gardens on one side, and that big shop where they sell everything—what's the name again?—on the other,” said Strang to Isobel.

“The Gardens, yes. Whiteley's, no,” she replied.

“Then you live quite close to Kensington Gardens?” said Mrs. Clare.

“Quite close. Fossingham Street turns out of Bayswater Road. It is near a big, old-fashioned house surrounded by a garden,” said Isobel.

“I don't recollect the exact spot at the minute,” said Mrs. Clare; “Is it a wide road with trees on either side and curious little lodges at both ends?”

“No, that is Palace Gardens. Ours is a very narrow street, with a high brick wall on one side.”

“Not a flower bed, nor even a privet hedge to be found here,” said Strang.

“Only the branches of the trees in the old garden hanging over the wall,” said Isobel.

“No ground to the houses in your street?” asked Edwin Clare.

“Back yards,” replied Isobel.

“I know the kind of place you mean,” put in Mrs. Clare, cheerfully; “Some friends of mine in Kensington can only grow nasturtiums and daisies.”

“We can only grow stonecrop and that is black!” said Isobel.

“Where did your father get his inspiration to make his boxes which look like big marigolds?” asked Strang; then, turning to his sister; “You know the cherry

wood box I sent to you from town, Alma ? That was Mr. Erne's work."

"Oh, my father rides out of London on his bicycle every Sunday. He often brings flowers home to copy."

"How jolly!" exclaimed Edwin Clare.

"Yes, isn't it a jolly idea?" agreed his wife.

Jolly was the favourite adjective of the period. Mrs. Clare called everything jolly, from a sunset to a savoury, from a picture to a pig.

"Do you ride a tricycle, Miss Isobel?" asked Strang.

"No."

"You wouldn't care to learn?"

"Not to push myself along in an armchair on three wheels. When I ride, it shall be a bicycle."

"I'd rather see you mounted like Diana Vernon," said Strang.

"I don't like the idea of girls sitting astride on bicycles," said Mrs. Clare.

"We shall live to see them sitting astride on horses——," began her husband.

"Never, Edwin, never!"

"——In Rotten Row and everybody will be accustomed to it," concluded Edwin, gloomily.

"When you come back to us in the spring, Isobel, I'll teach you to ride," said Strang.

On leaving the dinner table the girl followed Mrs. Clare reluctantly into the drawing room. Strang, as usual, went into his study. She listened, hardly daring to breathe, for the sound of the closing door.

It was her last night! Surely he would call her in to him. Her eyes narrowed and she stood still, glancing sideways, ready to dart away. Mrs. Clare sat down to her embroidery. Edwin walked about for a few minutes, staring at the pictures and ornaments as if he had never seen them before, and then went to the piano and began to play Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words," one after another as if he was conscientiously practising.

Isobel bent her head over a magazine lying on the table, apparently absorbed in the first page she opened, but reading words with no sense of their meaning. Her head ached and her throat was dry with the effort of suppressing tears.

The old clock, standing on guard in a corner of the hall, chimed and struck ten. Mrs. Clare stitched and stitched with her white fingers, a wild rose taking form on the silk before her. Edwin played on, page after page. Isobel turned the leaves of her magazine, feeling cold and ill with disappointment.

Suddenly she gave a start. Her eyes dilated as she turned towards the door.

"Isobel! Isobel!"

Strang called. She sprang to her feet, threw down the magazine and ran out of the room.

"Impetuous young person!" observed Edwin Clare, as he turned a page and flattened it open with both hands.

"Poor child, as if she could enter into Godfrey's thoughts and interests for a minute!" said Mrs. Clare.

* * * * *

"Isobel, you must modify your determination not to take anything away from Lulworth House to-morrow," said Strang, as the girl went into the study; "I have had these two books specially bound in your favourite colour."

"For me?"

"To be sure! You haven't read them. I hope you won't find them too dull. They are my own."

He opened the books on the table.

"Oh, Mr. Strang! How can I thank you? Will you write in them?"

He wrote her name, "with love from Godfrey Strang," in each of the books. Then he took a small box off the mantelpiece.

"Here is another little gift I want you to accept, Isobel, in memory of your first coming to Lulwater. I meant to give it to you on your birthday, a fortnight ago, but the aggravating man in London couldn't get it done in time. I wish I'd asked your father to make a pretty box, but this will serve, for I hope you'll wear the ring, not keep it in white satin."

A bezel of gold held a turquoise of perfect colour, the hoop being formed by two interwoven serpents, their heads divided by the stone.

Isobel could not speak for pleasure. She looked from the books to the ring, from the ring to the books, her childish lips parted, an unusual flush of bright colour in her face.

"See whether it fits one of your little fingers," said Strang, smiling at her and taking the ring out of the box; "The serpent is an emblem of eternity. The turquoise is—is—well, a phosphate of alumina, with a little oxide of iron and copper all mixed up together."

"No, it is a piece out of the blue sky!" exclaimed Isobel.

She put the ring on the middle finger of her right hand and looked at it for a few seconds. Then, with a sudden impulse, she laid her hands on Strang's breast and raised her face to kiss him. He stooped and lightly touched her cheek.

"I wish I was not going away," whispered Isobel.

"The spring will soon be here, darling," he answered; "In the meantime I want you to go on drawing, learn to sew—not embroidery at first, but nice plain hemming—and read all the books we've talked about."

He sat down in the chair by his writing table, with the girl opposite. There was no difference in their talk from any other night, but she loved and cherished every word.

The light from a shaded lamp glowed through the crimson petals of a bowl of roses on the table, full blown, heavy scented. The corners of the room were in shadow. There was not a sound to be heard in the darkness of the night without. The notes of the piano, played in the distance, were rippling and soft, like an echo of music.

Strang's talk was desultory. Isobel had a gift for listening, more rare than one supposes. To listen well, with an expression of interest which suggests the immediate possibility of retort, wit, or comment, is very different from the blank silence of strained attention.

Her quietude attracted him, at such times, as much as her wild grace in running and dancing when they were out of doors. Her pure profile, with the ivy crown in her hair, was still as a lovely painting when he ceased speaking and she sat in thought.

The question passed through his mind—what does the

future hold for this awakening soul? How will the promise of such beauty be fulfilled? Then came the poignant thought of the man of wide experience and deep nature—
‘Ah! If I could be young again——!’”

* * * *

The clock in the hall chimed and struck eleven. Strang rose to his feet.

“My dear little girl, you ought to be in the visionary world of dreams, instead of listening to the prose-prosing of an old sage like me.”

Isobel gathered up her books and obediently moved towards the door. They heard Mrs. Clare leaving the drawing room, and Edwin whistling.

“Good night!” said Strang; “May I carry your books upstairs for you, or will you leave them down here until the morning?”

“No, I am going to pack my trunk to-night,” replied the girl.

“Surely not! Let one of the maids do it for you to-morrow.”

“I would rather do it myself, please. I don’t like to trouble the maids to work for me.”

“Very well, dear.”

They went up the wide staircase side by side. He relinquished the books at her door, patted her shoulder with a last “Good night,” and left her.

The lamp was already lighted on Isobel’s dressing table. She sat down in a big chair and looked long at her surroundings.

The room was very pretty, luxurious to her simple taste, with its soft carpet, mirrors, pale wall paper, vases of flowers, white bed and down pillows, but it only appealed to her because it was in Lulworth House. She had been so happy in this room, slept so peacefully after thrilling days, awakened so joyously on glorious mornings.

How often had she heard the sound of Strang’s voice calling to her from the garden; how often had she listened for his step passing by the door, and run out to meet him as he went downstairs. How often had she knelt on the ground, resting both elbows on the window seat,

reading the books he had chosen for her, loving them for his sake as much as for their own.

She sat still for some time, with her precious ring clasped in her right hand, then she kissed it and put it carefully in its little box on the dressing table.

Her old trunk was against the wall. Isobel emptied the drawers and wardrobe of her few belongings, putting them on the ground ready to be packed.

Then, and not till then, she fully realized the truth. She was going away. She was leaving Lulwater in a few short hours! She must say good-bye to the dear stranger—the gentle friend—the true lover.

Her lover! Isobel's heart leapt to the whisper of the word, but as innocently, as childishly, as gratefully as on the first day he had bade her welcome.

He had never said he loved her—it was not her time to love—but she knew herself to be very dear to him. She was wholly unconscious of the change Lulwater had made in her sympathies and emotions. Her opinions and beliefs were still unformed. Strang had made no attempt to influence her mind, but it reflected, as far as it was capable, his own.

He knew what she thought of him. It was not the first time he had awakened passionate loyalty and tenderness in a girl, but it was many, many years since any woman had affected him in the same way.

There had been scattered minutes when the difference between them—the world-wide differences between a distinguished man of his age and learning and an undeveloped girl—had been swept away by a most subtle, amazing attraction towards each other. Such minutes had rarely found words. Strang had never allowed them to be marked by one caress, even a touch of hands, but the spirit that looked at him out of her eyes understood and responded to his own.

* * * * *

Isobel began to cry as she packed her trunk. She cried softly, persistently, going on with the work as carefully as if her mind was absorbed in it.

She slowly undressed when it was done, put the

turquoise ring again on her finger, turned out the lamp, and drew aside the curtains across the windows.

The lake was flooded with moonbeams. The bright orb of night shone through faint, drifting clouds. The hills were as shadows cast upon the earth.

Silence and perfect peace.

Isobel was calmed and consoled. She crept into the bed, kissed her ring, and, turning her tear-drenched face upon the pillow, instantly fell asleep.

CHAPTER III

FAREWELL

It was early morning when Isobel again looked out of her window.

August was gone. Young September looked hazy and half asleep. The window panes were flicked with fine rain.

A wish Isobel had never dared to gratify suddenly became irresistible. She had always longed to go on the lake at dawn. It was too late for that, but still there were nearly two hours before the maid would knock at her door to say it was eight o'clock.

It was a satisfaction to know that there was a long passage between her room and Mrs. Clare's. She felt that her hostess was sharper of hearing than anybody else. Strang slept even farther away. His windows, like her own, overlooked the lake.

Isobel dressed very quietly, put on her little shining black waterproof, with its hood that fastened snugly under her chin, and stealthily made her way downstairs.

The familiar house looked strange and ghostly in slits of light through shutters and drawn blinds. She did not attempt to escape by the heavily bolted front door. It was easier and less noisy to go through the kitchen to the side entrance, opening on a stone-paved yard.

The rain was so slight that she hardly felt it on her face, but it made every leaf gleam, and a sweet, grassy smell came up from the earth.

There were robins everywhere. One perched on the top of the wall where Isobel turned off the road towards the lake; another was singing his blithe lilt on the swaying branch of a blackberry bush; she saw a third balanced on the mossy stump of a tree, his bright eye scanning the heavens.

The soft rain dripped and murmured in the branches of the larch, over-hanging the little harbour.

Isobel got a pair of oars, vigorously pushed the Arrow over the stones into the water and jumped on board. The old boat slipped out of the harbour into the misty stillness of the lake. She backed water with one oar, pulled with the other, and then began to row slowly towards the east.

The rhythmic swing of the strokes, and the cool, sweet air in her face, stirred the thoughtful girl's mind to its depths. She seemed to be living in a conscious dream, not surprised to find herself alone on the lake, but vaguely hoping she would not awaken, responsive to the mystery of the hour and place, in harmony with the heard and unheard music of Nature.

The rain ceased. The colour of day intensified. As the Arrow rounded a little promontory, about half a mile below Lulworth House, Isobel saw the figure of a man making his way down the steep bank to the water's edge.

She knew at a first glance it was Godfrey Strang, stopped rowing, and lifted her oars a little way out of the water. The falling drops widened from little rings into great hoops and ever enlarging circles to the edge of the lake, even as her thoughts eddied to his feet.

Strang stood immovable and beckoned to her with his right hand.

Tall and grey, he looked like a wraith of the man she knew. Light and shadow were so intermingled that he was as much hidden by one as by the other, once more giving her the impression of a dream, for even as he looked he seemed to disappear, only to be there once more in the throb of a heart-beat.

Isobel turned the Arrow and rowed ashore. Something of the sense of mystery left her, as she heard his voice, giving place to delight.

"Move into the stern, dear. Give me the oars," said Strang; "You must let me do the work this morning."

"Did you follow me?" asked Isobel, as they glided away from the promontory.

"Yes, I was up very early."

"Then you heard me go out by the side door?"

"No, mouse! I saw the Arrow slip from the harbour

more slowly than any archer could shoot her. So I got my glass to see who was rowing away with our boat and behold! it was my Isobel."

Isobel dabbled her fingers in the water. She had pushed the black hood of the waterproof back from her forehead, showing her throat and the soft wave of her hair. There was a rosy warmth of colour under the smooth ivory of her skin. She smiled pensively when she met his eyes.

"Do you remember the first time I brought you to the lake, Isobel?"

"Yes. It was on the morning after I came down from London. I longed to row, but I was too shy to ask your permission."

"Ah! That was in the middle of last July, child. I meant when we first rowed in a boat together, years and years ago."

She looked surprised and puzzled for a minute, then she shook her head gravely.

"I don't remember very well. You see I was a different girl then. I wasn't Isobel Erne. Tell me about it."

"The lake was the same when first we met, and the old mountains," he began.

"Before the Arrow was built?" she interrupted.

"Before the good larch of the Arrow was a sapling ages before. There was no village then, or ugly houses at the foot of the lake, or stupid pleasure parties being dragged up and down the hills by weary horses. I didn't write books in those days, and you had not heard of London."

"Did we live at Lulworth House?"

"There was no Lulworth House. There was only Edwin Clare and I don't think, between ourselves, that there was an Alma Clare either."

"Then we were the only people!" exclaimed Isobel opening her eyes wide.

"No, there were shepherds and a few farmers. I and I lived on an island at the other end of the lake. You know the place I mean, where we sat by the water all the whole afternoon, a while ago, and found so many wild strawberries. It was the sound of that very sound to

waterfall which made you give the name of Lulwater to our home."

"What did I look like in those bygone days?"

"I think you were a dark-haired girl," said Strang, pretending to ponder; "Your eyes were set wide apart and you had the sweetest-tempered mouth in the world. You were too day-dreamy, perhaps, and very romantic."

"How much I've changed!" exclaimed Isobel; then, appealingly:—"I'm not so very romantic, am I?"

"Why, I believe you were in love with the Disinherited Knight all the time you were reading *Ivanhoe*."

"No, it was King Richard, Mr. Strang."

"Speaking seriously, I hope you won't spend all your spare time reading stories. You ought to be out of doors."

"I've no lake to row upon, and no hills to climb in Bayswater," sighed Isobel; "But it's not surprising I should be fond of novels. My mother reads them all day long."

She had rarely spoken of her mother. He noticed the sudden hardness in her voice.

"I don't want to criticize mother," the girl added, quickly; "I suppose she is more fond of books than I am. She is never so happy as when she is crying over a sad tale."

"Does she buy so many novels?"

"No, borrows them from her friends, and buys the 'Family Herald' every week. She can read the same story over and over again, because she never troubles to remember anything—but don't let us talk about my home," Isobel broke off; "Tell me, will you ever think about our row this morning when I'm far away?"

"I will often think about it. You must write to me whenever you feel inclined, dear, and I'll promise to answer your letters, if not by return of post, before the sun has set twice over the lake."

"Will you keep that promise if I write every day?" asked Isobel, smiling.

"You won't write every day, my dear. I'm sure you take too much trouble over your letters, and tear up too many, to give me such a test."

"How do you know I tear up my letters and take trouble over them?" she cried.

"Because they're such stiff little notes—don't be vexed, darling—and composed so very conscientiously, question and answer and yours affectionately."

"Perhaps you would rather I didn't write at all?" she asked, deeply hurt.

"No, no, I'm thankful for small mercies in pretty envelopes."

Isobel, looking tragic, again dabbled her fingers in the cold water. Strang leaned forward, holding the oar with one hand, and touched her.

"Let there be no shadow on your face to-day, my sweet Isobel. I want to think of you—till the spring—as the happiest girl in London. It would be the greatest reproach to me if I had made you sad or weary for a single hour."

"I'm only sad at the thought of going away . . . must we row back so soon?"

"I'm afraid we must."

"Go very slowly, please. I want to know the lake and mountains by heart."

He pulled a long, steady stroke. The rays of the sun broke through the clouds which floated afar like grey smoke. The lonely hills seemed still to hold the mystery of night in the shadowy distance, but all the meadows and nearer fells were swept by the morning light.

There was no other boat upon the lake. No soul, as far as they could see, upon the shores.

Strang did not speak until they were close to the little harbour of Lulworth House.

"Thanks for a perfect hour, Isobel. Good-byes are often spoken in the darkness of night, but the time of our farewell is better chosen."

He rowed ashore. She twined her small fingers round his hand as he helped her out of the boat.

"I've a strange feeling that you won't see me in the spring," she said; "But I *must* return some day."

"Whenever you come back, my darling, I will be here to meet you. If I'm not waiting at Lulworth, look for me on the shores of the lake."

"Promise?"

"I promise. Farewell!"

He stooped, Isobel clasped her hands round his neck and kissed him; not as she had kissed him when he had carried her in his arms on the previous night, stealthily and tenderly, but like a frank child to an old familiar friend—a fresh kiss of the morning, swift and light-hearted.

Strang was well pleased. With his arm thrown round her shoulders, they made their way to the garden, only lingering to gather a handful of little ferns from between the stones of the wall.

* * * * *

The carriage was at the door. Edwin Clare, who was to take their guest to the station—Strang detested station partings and always refused to go—stood in the porch, patiently waiting.

Mrs. Clare bade the girl an affectionate good-bye, really feeling a touch of the regret she expressed so volubly.

"Your luncheon basket is in the carriage, dear one. My husband will get you some papers to read. I do hope you'll like the strawberries. You must give our kindest remembrances to—to—" Mrs. Clare was embarrassed for a second by forgetting with whom Isobel lived—"All your people at home."

Strang watched his sister with a certain amount of amusement. If only she had greeted the shy little girl as cordially as she was sending her away!

"Going to be a fine day, Thwaite?" asked Edwin, glancing at the sky.

"It's bright enough behind the 'carries,' sir," replied the coachman.

"Do you know that the 'carries' mean the clouds which drift across the blue?" said Strang to Isobel, as she came out of the hall.

"I understand," she replied, putting out her hand; "Good-bye, Mr. Strang."

"Good-bye! Don't forget to write to us when you get home to-night. Thanks for coming. God bless you, dear. Good-bye! Good-bye!"

Isobel leaned out of the carriage window. Mrs. Clare

was at the door, fluttering a handkerchief. Strang stood on the steps, one hand raised, immovable as she had seen him on the promontory in the morning.

* * * *

Isobel was glad when the train steamed out of the station. She was weary of talking and listening to Edwin Clare.

She could see the curving lines of the lake, the roof and turret of Lulworth House. There was the shaded harbour; the verdant fields; the windows of the drawing room and Strang's study; perhaps he was standing there, looking towards her, his eyes following the swirl of smoke from the engine of her train. It was too far away for her to have seen any figure clearly, if it had been there.

The whole landscape looked like a painted picture, serene and lovely.

Isobel gazed and gazed, through misty eyes. She did not think of the spring, or her return. The present minute was fraught with tense emotion that she remembered all the days of her life.

* * * *

Lulworth House was gone. The lake faded to a glimmering ribbon in the far distance. The mountains were lost in gathering clouds.

Isobel lay back in her seat, with her eyes shut, deep in the long thoughts of youth.

LONDON

CHAPTER I

THE MARRIAGE OF CECILIA ERNE

No. 14 Fossingham Street, Bayswater, was a corner house. It faced a high brick wall surrounding a garden.

The high wall caused the meeting of two narrow streets at its angle to be a dangerous spot for incautious drivers. An official notice to this effect had long been mud-splashed nearly out of sight. An unofficial guardian of the public safety was to be seen in the person of a spirited old woman, who had her pitch against the side of No. 14.

The old woman was supposed to be a crossing sweeper, but her office was a mere sinecure. A stump of a broom, as a matter of form, stood against the wall beside her stool, but she spent her time in regulating the traffic, regardless of the fact that none of the drivers paid any attention, except the butcher boys in high carts who strongly resented her interference.

The Erne children had nicknamed her Mrs. Cherry, and discovered, to their great interest, that there was a Mr. Cherry, who had lost the use of his legs and conducted a chickweed and groundsel business in a neighbouring street. There was also a Miss Cherry, who sold matches and kettle-holders in Westbourne Grove.

No. 14 was one of those high, narrow London houses that the women who live in them describe as "all stairs." The double-fronted shop window was divided between two businesses. "Henry Erne, Boxes" was painted over the right hand side, "Starling, Watch-maker and Jeweller" over the left.

Erne and Starling also shared the house. Mr. Starling lived in the basement, Mr. Erne and his family in the

upper part. It would have been hard to find two men more dissimilar. There was much of the artist in Henry Erne. His friend was a slow, thick-headed man, whose whole intelligence seemed to have oozed into his fairly skilful fingers.

Mr. Starling was a widower with one son, who worked at the same trade in a wholesale house in Clerkenwell, and a married daughter. Mr. Erne had a wife and three girls.

If the Society leaders of Bayswater, thirty years since, had taken any interest in Henry Erne's little shop—but they didn't—they would have been surprised to know his history. Godfrey Strang guessed it, but that was another matter. He was not a Society leader.

In brief, Erne was well-born, well-educated, well-bred. But he had no money sense and he had married an idle woman. Is that all? Mrs. Clare and many others would have exclaimed. Idleness is no sin, like many other things, taken in moderation. Mrs. Erne was intemperate in laziness, physical and mental. She ought to have grown fat and stupid, in consequence, but she was too careful of her health for the former, too selfish for the latter.

Her daughters inherited her good looks. A dark, alluring beauty had been her one asset. She had made the best of it by marrying a man who promised well. Unfortunately the promise was unfulfilled, for after three and twenty years she found herself living in Fossingham Street, as faded as her own furniture and dusty carpets.

* * * * *

The Erne girls were marked down to be beloved by men.

It is often a reproach to young people that they expect to begin the world where their parents leave off. Cecilia, the eldest, had succeeded in beginning at a height never reached by her luckless father and mother.

She had married at twenty-two. The so-called happy man was twice twenty two with a few years added to that for luck.

Their courtship had been brief and business-like. A chased silver box, in the window, had caused Mr

Benjamin Reuben to enter No. 14, being struck by the two things which usually attract a member of his discriminating race—beauty and a bargain. He made up his mind in an instant to possess the box, after an attempt to beat down the salesman to an even lower price.

Cecilia Erne was minding the shop.

She lolled over the counter, sleeves to the elbow, her bare arms hooped with thin silver bangles. It was a summer afternoon. The bright sunshine, dust-specked and slanting through the window, glowed on her young, but most womanly, face and form. Her cheeks and mouth were richly coloured as a rose, her hair luxuriant, her teeth pearly—she was always showing them, having a trick of keeping her lips slightly open—and she gave an impression of warmth and health and abundance of beauty that startled and bewitched the wealthy Jew.

He bought the silver box, and stood on his side of the counter, listening and staring at the handsome girl on her side of the counter, for over half an hour.

Cecilia liked his bold admiration, being an admirably self-possessed and not over sensitive young woman, although she mimicked his way of fingering his moustache, and half closing his liquid eyes, for the amusement of her sisters afterwards.

“When do you expect him to come again?” asked Laura, the practical.

“Did he tell you he wanted to come again?” asked Isobel, wonderingly.

“What rubbish! I never expect to see him again,” replied Cecilia, knowing that she lied; “Mind you don’t say anything to Father and Mother.”

“As if I should!” exclaimed Laura.

“Why not?” asked Isobel, innocently.

Mr. Reuben called on the following day, and the next, and the next.

Cecilia left off imitating him behind his back. She and Laura were always talking in whispers on their side of the room shared by the three sisters. Isobel, too proud to ask questions, unsuspecting, and secretly hurt by their neglect, pretended to be asleep in her own little bed in the opposite corner.

She guessed at once, for all her childishness, where Cecilia got the big boxes of sweets and bottles of perfume, which were so carefully hidden from her parents. But she could not imagine why her father was so angry when he happened to meet Cissy, late in the evening, walking in a quiet part of Kensington Gardens with Mr. Reuben.

Again, she was too proud to ask questions, but fully aware of a strained atmosphere in the house, long talks behind closed doors, stormy scenes with Cecilia, an unexpected visit from Mr. Reuben—who had never before crossed the threshold—and very evident differences of opinion between her father and mother.

Mrs. Erne favoured the idea of friendship with Cecilia's rich Jew. She was sure it would be "all right." Mr. Erne forbade him the house.

Benjamin Reuben's attitude towards the girl was not unlike his attitude towards the chased silver box which had brought them together. He intended to be the possessor of the one as of the other, and was willing to pay a high price with a good grace if he failed to make a bargain.

His first wife, whose loss he had been mourning for nearly a year when he met Cecilia Erne, had been a rich woman. He was a wine merchant of Polish descent, but so entirely English that only his physical appearance, a few innate traits in his character, and his aforesaid admiration of beauty, combined with shrewd dealing, proclaimed the Hebrew.

Cecilia was not in love with Benjamin Reuben. He compared well, however, with the only men she had had the opportunity of meeting—Mr. Starling, a few commercial travellers, a French hairdresser who had wanted to elope with her when she was seventeen, another secret lover, and the middle-aged husbands of some of her mother's friends—and his ardour amazed her. He swore that it would last for ever, and she believed him.

Added to all this, she longed for fine clothes, jewels, ease, a purseful of money, and Reuben whetted her appetite for luxury with gifts, the sight of his house, hints of his generosity, and exaggerated pity for her poverty.

The courtship ended as rapidly as it had begun.

When Isobel went home one day, after spending a fortnight with a certain aunt Althea in a far off suburb, she was astounded to find Mr. Reuben having tea in the sitting room with her parents, Cecilia and Laura. He was apparently on the best of terms with the ladies, and gloomily tolerated by her father.

Cecilia bloomed into greater beauty in the flashing sparkle of her diamond engagement ring. It had been the first Mrs. Reuben's ring, by the way, although her lover did not mention that fact until after their marriage. He was not a man to be debarred by foolish sentiment from making his bride-to-be happy with other possessions of his first wife, but he did it discreetly and nobody suspected him.

Isobel was too young—it was three years before she went to Lulwater—to notice anything beyond the outer excitement of her sister's wedding.

Cecilia was married at a registry office. She was accompanied by her whole family, the bridegroom by a friend, who was so very youthful and wore so big a button-hole that the registrar mistook him for the happy man, and, being a prompt little official, had almost married him to the bride before they knew the ceremony had begun.

The three Erne girls, in their light frocks, looked strangely out of place in the bare, dull office. Their mother's new dress swept the dusty floor and her white gloves were spoilt by touching one of the wooden chairs. Mr. Erne wandered in as if he was a stranger, and amused himself by reading aloud the announcements of forthcoming marriages which were displayed upon the wall, with such interjections as:—

“Poor fellow!” “If they only knew!” “She's old enough to be his mother!” and other cheerful comments on the prospective couples.

Mr. Benjamin Reuben could not take his eyes off his bride. There was a bright flush in her cheeks, a glitter in her eyes, that excited and enchanted him.

He shook hands with the registrar, the best man, and Mr. and Mrs. Erne, kissed his new sisters, and drew Cecilia's hand through his arm with a satisfaction and warmth that were almost unctuous.

They had breakfast in a private room at an hotel. The boy with the big buttonhole did his duty nobly, for the assembled guests were ill assorted, hard upon one another, and obstinately declined to fuse.

The bridegroom's brothers and brothers' wives were too effusive to Cecilia and too distant to her people. They began as they meant to go on. "Ben" had married the handsome girl, whether they liked it or not, but he had not married her parents and sisters. The good looks of the Erne girls did them no service with the Reubens, for the ladies of that family happened to be particularly unattractive.

Mrs. Erne, in her dusty skirt and soiled gloves, made no effort to conciliate her daughter's new connections. Mr. Erne regarded them all with about as amiable an expression as Antonio must have worn when he met Shylock and Company on the Rialto.

Grandmother Erne had come all the way from Chertsey to congratulate her first grandchild to be married. The breakfast, the hotel plate, and the dresses of the Reuben ladies, made the old lady positively numb with nervousness. She spilt her tea, fumbled her wedding cake into crumbs, and called the head waiter "sir."

Mr. Starling had brought, uninvited, his married daughter. This would not have mattered if the married daughter had not brought in her turn, also uninvited, her young family. A fretful little girl of three, a high-spirited little boy of five, and a baby at what his mother called the grabbin' age, monopolized a little too much of the company's attention.

The best man laughed, talked, headed off the children, flattered the Reuben ladies, made speeches, and even dangled the baby. He behaved like the bridegroom's best friend, but it appeared that they had met only a week before the wedding.

They called each other "Ben" and "Joe," but that was the beginning and end of their intimacy. Mr. Joseph Hesketh quickly hailed people by their first names, and all the men he knew called him Joe.

Cecilia became more flushed and bright-eyed as the hours passed. She drank champagne at her bridegroom's entreaty, frowned and pouted, chattered and

laughed. She sat with both her elbows resting on the table, in the way she had lolled over the counter on the day he first saw her, but now she wore ruby and pearl bracelets instead of cheap silver bangles.

There were no tears or lengthened partings when the time came for the bride to say good-bye.

She gave her kisses indiscriminately, right and left, until she came to Laura and Isobel. Then she paused, but only for a few seconds for Reuben was pulling her away, and threw her arm round both their necks as they came together. The three young, soft faces were pressed close, and then Cecilia looked from one to the other, as she tore herself away, with a fleeting expression which Isobel never forgot. What did she see in her sister's eyes? Regret—defiance—wild, indefinite fear—? A flash and it was gone, leaving only tenderness behind.

Reuben leaned out of the carriage, beaming, and waving his hand in exultant good-bye to the group in the hotel doorway.

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It was all over so quickly that only a few passers-by had had time to see the wedding party before they disappeared again, with their laughter and flowers and gay clothes. A poor old woman, with eager haste, began to fumble a little heap of rice which had fallen from a broken bag into a bit of paper.

The best man saw her, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out sixpence.

"Go and buy a pound for yourself, granny, don't carry off our rice pudding!" he said.

The old woman lifted a shade that was over one of her eyes to look at him, but before she had time to speak an officious hotel page, with a broom, had swept her with the fallen rice into the gutter.

Isobel, being the last to gaze after the bridal pair, had seen Joe Hesketh give his coin, which pleased her, and heard his speech, which jarred upon her. Trifles both, but she observed Joe curiously for a minute. He returned the look, frankly and freely. Neither of them spoke.

He thought of her afterwards as a pretty little girl. Isobel did not think of him at all.

The uncongenial party soon separated. The Reuben brothers and their wives returned to the heights of Campden Hill and West Hampstead. The Erne family went back to the depths of Fossingham Street.

"There's one thing good about a wedding—it's soon over," observed Mrs. Erne, after a long tirade on her son-in-law's proud relations.

"Except for the newly married couple," her husband added, grimly.

CHAPTER II

THE MARRIAGE OF LAURA ERNE

It is particularly aggravating to find an important chapter torn out of a novel one is reading, or miss the first scene of a good play.

It was Isobel's misfortune to be away from home when Cecilia became engaged to Benjamin Reuben. So she never read the first chapter of her sister's story with her own eyes.

She was at Lulwater when Laura Erne met Arthur Welwyn. So she was obliged to study that little domestic comedy from the middle of the act.

Laura was a second Cecilia without the elder sister's spirit; another Isobel without the younger's individuality.

In appearance she resembled Cecilia, but lacked her wealth of beauty, being made on smaller lines, a little blurred and rough in finish—a good copy until one compared it with the original. Laura was imperturbably sweet-tempered, more like a peony than a rose, but a pink peony be it understood, freshly gathered, no hint of the size it may become when it is fully blown.

She was the only one of the three girls who had not had to struggle against the lassitude inherited from their mother. Full of energy, Laura had done her best for the neglected house in Fossingham Street. With the help, or hindrance, of a long succession of charwomen, she scrubbed and rubbed, dusted and window-polished. It was most commendable in a girl of her age, although she frequently made the family very uncomfortable with bustle and house-cleaning.

Old Mrs. Welwyn frequently remarked what a wife Laura Erne would make for a man who loved his home.

Mrs. Welwyn lived in Aberdeen Gardens, a snug little street without any gardens, turning out of Bayswater

Road. Mrs. Welwyn was a widow with an income to match her abode, small and comfortable. Mrs. Welwyn was the mother of an only son. The only son held a position in the General Post Office, for which he had been trained and fitted from the age of sixteen by his prudent parents, because he could retire on a good pension when he was sixty.

A position in the G.P.O. suggests, to the public at large, a double knock and a sack over the shoulder, or selling stamps and weighing parcels in an office. Arthur Welwyn was one of the thousands who do the work behind the scenes. Even his mother did not exactly know what he did, except that it began at half-past nine, ended at four, and was exceedingly well paid.

He had known the Erne girls since the days when they trundled hoops and played ball together in Kensington Gardens. At that time his mother occasionally asked them to tea. As they grew bigger the intimacy cooled. The girls did not care about the more and more rare invitations. Cecilia refused to be patronized by old Mrs. Welwyn. Her sisters followed her lead.

It was Laura who renewed the friendship. She did not mind being patronized, or was too thick-skinned to notice it. Mrs. Welwyn liked her, and thought no more of a possible love affair with Arthur than the queen-mother of King Cophetua when she happened to see a good looking beggar girl loitering at the royal gates.

The old lady knew that Cecilia Erne had married "exceedingly well." The Reubens' landau, casually mentioned by Laura, duly impressed her. She was graciously pleased to accept an invitation from Mrs. Reuben to drive in Hyde Park.

Those were the days when a long procession of carriages was to be seen aimlessly trailing from Hyde Park Corner to Knightsbridge, from Knightsbridge to Hyde Park Corner, over and over again every afternoon during the London season.

Mrs. Welwyn held her parasol as proudly as a flag over her best bonnet, occasionally glancing kindly at the lower order of beings who trudged along on foot, or leaned on the railings at the edge of the road to stare at their betters driving past.

Mrs. Reuben lounged in her place, looking more bored and much more handsome than the majority of women in other carriages. Laura sat with her back to the horses, smiling happily and pleased with everything, in her cheap, pretty summer frock with its twenty inch waist.

This eventful drive, the forerunner of many others, invitations to lunch and occasional tickets for afternoon concerts, took place while Isobel was at Lulwater.

On her return home Laura had a secret to tell. She was in no hurry to tell it. It was not until they were alone in their bedroom, at night, that she spoke.

Isobel stood at the window, staring at the blank wall facing the house. Her spirit was far away, in the study at Lulworth House, listening to the dear echo of Strang's voice.

Laura stood in front of the looking glass, brushing her hair. Her hair was long, thick and bright brown. She softly hummed a love song :—

“As the flight of a river that flows to thesea,
My soul rushes ever in tumult to thee.
A twofold existence, I am where thou art,
My heart in the distance beats close to thy heart.
Look up! I am near thee, I gaze on thy face,
I see thee, I hear thee, I feel thine embrace.”

* * * * *

“Belle!” said Laura, suddenly.

There was no reply.

“I say, Belle! Don't stand staring out of that window. There's nothing to look at, is there?”

“No, nothing. I wasn't thinking about Fossingham Street,” said Isobel, shaking off her daydream with an effort; “What is it, Laura?”

“I'm sure you've grown since you went away!” exclaimed her sister, as the younger girl turned round; “I'm sure you look ever so much older.”

“In six weeks? Oh, Lol!”

“Well, it's your growing age in every way. I was a baby at fourteen, but at sixteen I knew everything.”

“You've managed to forget a good deal since,” observed Isobel.

Laura laughed good-naturedly. She plaited her hair in two braids, tying each one with a little bit of old ribbon. The long, glossy ropes reached nearly to her waist.

"Can you guess the news, Belle?" she asked, bluntly.

Isobel, who was taking her clothes out of the trunk, shook her head.

"What news? Everything is just as it was when I went away."

"Oh, do take a little interest in my affairs!" cried Laura; "Don't begin to behave like Cissy whatever you do."

"How does Cissy behave?" asked Isobel, instantly on the defensive for Cecilia.

"Yawns and doesn't listen to a word you say."

"I can't help yawning, I'm so tired, Lol, but of course, I'll listen."

"Very well then. I was engaged last Thursday!"

"Oh, where did you go?" asked Isobel.

"Where did I go?" repeated Laura, indignantly; "What on earth do you mean?"

"You said you were engaged. I thought it was a party."

"Of all the little idiots——!" exclaimed Laura; then she relented and pulled her sister down beside her on her bed; "I'm engaged to be married, Belle. Don't you understand? Cissy isn't the only person in the family who can get married."

"Oh, Laura!" said Isobel, the colour rushing into her cheeks, her eyes wide with excitement and wonder; "Oh, Laura!"

Laura laughed at her expression. She had always been jealous of Cecilia and was delighted to see the intense interest and love in Isobel's face.

"Yes, it's true. It isn't very complimentary of you to be so surprised."

"Is it Mr. Hanley, Lol?" asked the younger girl, eagerly.

"Good gracious, no!"

"But you thought of being engaged to him—you told me so——" cried Isobel.

"He was all very well, but only a music teacher. I'm not going to spend my life listening to people strumming

on the piano, 'one, two, three—F sharp—one, two, three—*an-dan-te*!' " said Laura, imitating the rejected Mr. Hanley who had taught her all she knew of music.

"Then I suppose it's Bertie Smith?" said Isobel, a little doubtfully this time.

"You suppose wrong. Certainly not! I didn't really like anything about Bertie, except the emerald pendant he bought me, and father said *that* was green glass. No, I'm engaged to Arthur Welwyn."

"Oh, Laura!"

"Good heavens, child! Don't keep on repeating 'Oh, Laura!' like a parrot, or a clock."

"I'm so surprised. Old Mrs. Welwyn's son! You always said you wouldn't look at anybody with fair, curly hair, Lol. I had no idea he wanted to marry you."

"Neither had he till a few weeks ago," rejoined her sister, coolly; "I've always liked him. He's so sensible and he's got such a good position."

"But it's no use for a girl to care for a man unless he cares for her, is it?" said Isobel.

"You do ask such baby questions! Any girl can make some man care for her, and some girls can make any man care for them. You ask Cissy. She's that sort."

"She's married."

Laura laughed.

"Did you make Arthur Welwyn care for you?" asked Isobel, innocently.

"Of course not! I had no idea of it till he proposed," said Laura.

She looked into her sister's face with a sweet expression of simplicity. Then they both laughed—even Isobel—and drew closer together with arms intertwined.

"Tell me about it, Laura—and yet, somehow, I don't want to know," whispered Isobel; "You're not going to be married yet, are you, Lol? I can't think what I shall do without you."

"Wait a minute till I turn out the gas. If mother sees a light under the door she'll be curious to know what we're talking about. That's all right. Now I'll tell you——"

Laura's conversation resembled an old-fashioned style

of correspondence, lengthy, circumstantial and rather dull. It sobered Isobel, effectually checking her thoughts of romance and making her think that an engagement, after all, was rather a commonplace affair. She had been too young to be given Cecilia's confidence, before marriage, but she was certain it would have left her wondering.

Laura's news, the facts once told, only made her sleepy. Even the expected opposition of Mrs. Welwyn did not give Laura a minute's thrill of uncertainty. She had studied the old lady and knew her vulnerable parts. She blushed a little and smiled in discussing "Arthur," but seemed already to know all his affairs, tastes, likes and dislikes.

Indeed, she exceeded the prudence of his parents, having found out not only the amount of his retiring pension, but the provision a grateful country would make for his widow.

When the girls at last left off talking, not before midnight, Laura was the first to fall asleep. Isobel was exhausted with her journey home and the excitement of her sister's news.

The late September night slowly changed into the flush of dawn. She woke from a slight sleep and got up to turn the slats of the Venetian blinds. The light fell on Laura's bed, not on her face, but slanting across her sheet and coverlet, where her right hand lay, palm upwards, with one of the braids of hair flattened beneath it.

Isobel knelt down for a few minutes, her face on a level with the calm, unwrinkled face of her sister, studying it.

She had often been thrown back upon herself by Laura's sweet, shallow acceptance of everything in life as a matter of course. Isobel's vague aspirations and strong, silent emotions were beyond Laura's ken. She thought the child was nonsensical. Cecilia, quicker-witted and less tender than Isobel, knew what to expect from dear old Lol and was content to ask no more. Isobel continually hoped for sympathy and subtlety where they were not to be found.

Laura did not look so pretty when she was asleep. Her lips had a babyish pout ; with the loss of her animated

gestures and movements, her figure showed heaviness and her face a threat—only a threat in these days—of mingled vacuity and placid self-satisfaction.

"She loves and is loved," thought Isobel; and brooded over the meaning of this absorption of one in one.

It was very strange as applied to Benjamin Reuben—Arthur Welwyn—was it possible that these two, so dissimilar in everything except their unattractiveness, could fill the thoughts and lives of such beautiful girls as her two sisters? Other men, whom she had known before they were married, passed before her mind's eye. What could any woman see in them? Yet their wives seemed to be happy. Happy—living always in the same house, eating, spending, talking, doing everything together! Then a different thought gave her pause.

She had lived herself for six weeks in Godfrey Strang's house, sharing with him the joys of all her waking hours. If they had been married——

Isobel felt her cheeks burn, not with any sense of disparity between them—sixteen and sixty!—but at her own presumption. As if Godfrey Strang could ever have married an ignorant, stupid, dull girl like Isobel Erne!

She crept back into her bed and watched the room grow lighter, lying at her ease, her hands clasped behind her head.

In spirit she was again at Lulwater, floating on the lake in the silvery dawn, watching for Strang to beckon her to the shore.

* * * * *

Laura's wedding was a very different affair from the signing of a business contract, at a registry office, by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Reuben.

She agreed with her sister Cecilia on one point only. A marriage party at home was banned by them both. Isobel was disappointed on the neighbours' account. Fossingham Street was equally interested in funerals, or movings, or fights, or bridals. Any excuse was good enough to leave off working.

"Everybody knows us and they would like to see you as a bride," said Isobel.

"Oh, yes, no doubt!" exclaimed Laura; "I suppose you want me to invite Mrs. Cherry, the crossing sweeper, and Miss Cherry with her stock of 'kittle'-olders.' She might sell some of them to the other guests."

"Why not have Miss Cherry for a bridesmaid?" asked Isobel, gravely.

"You're a little fool, Belle!" said Laura, trying not to laugh.

"No, but seriously, Lol, aren't you going to invite any of our friends about here?"

"You mean Mr. Starling. No, although he does live in the house. Don't you remember how he took his married daughter with three children to Cissy's wedding? There will be half a dozen by this time—do you want them all? Perhaps I'll ask George Starling. He's a young man, at all events, and there are always so many more girls."

"Will you have aunt Althea?"

Laura pondered.

"I should love it myself, but Mrs. Welwyn is so curious. She'll want to know all about her, and if she happens to get hold of Chertsey gran'ma—well, you know how they'll talk."

"Laura! Why do you all make such a mystery over aunt Althea's affairs? When I ask mother, she turns cross. Father looks miserable. Cissy says 'Never you mind, babs! It isn't your business.'"

Laura meditated for a longer time.

"You're sixteen, and I'm sure *I* knew everything at sixteen. Don't tell father I told you, but there's something funny about aunt Althea's marriage. That's why father made her promise only to have us there when Mr. Roseglade was away from home."

"How do you know that?" cried Isobel, all astonishment.

"I—I happened to overhear it," replied Laura, colouring.

"Do you mean you listened outside a door?" asked Isobel, contemptuously.

"Never you mind. I'm sorry I told you, but now you'll understand why I don't think it would be wise to ask aunt Althea to the wedding."

"What do you mean by 'something funny' about her marriage, Lol?"

"I tell you, I don't know all about it myself. It happened abroad. Different countries have different marriage laws. That's why it's such a good thing to be born in England where everything is legal and proper," replied Laura.

"Oh, Laura! Do you mean that aunt Althea is—not—really married?" gasped Isobel.

"Mother says she isn't, so does Cissy—don't look at me like that with your saucer eyes, it isn't my fault. Father says she was only stupid. I shall always like aunt Althea and probably invite her to our house, but I don't want to shock old Mrs. Welwyn or make Arthur uncomfortable before I'm married. It won't matter afterwards," concluded Miss Laura, cheerfully.

Isobel asked no further questions. She was so fond of Althea Roseglade, her father's only sister, and was too amazed and puzzled to be able to talk to Laura about it. It would be better to wait until Cissy was in a good mood. Cissy would tell her the truth.

So she resolutely closed her lips and made no comment when her aunt's name was left out of the list of guests.

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The Erne family was poorly represented at the wedding. The Welwyns were present in full force.

Isobel, as chief bridesmaid, was supported by three Welwyn girls, cousins of the bridegroom. The vicar of the church was assisted by a reverend Welwyn, uncle of the bridegroom. The health of the happy pair was proposed by a Welwyn in the law, and the cake was presented by a Welwyn in trade.

Mrs. Erne looked nearly as draggle-tailed as on the occasion of her elder daughter's marriage. As Mr. Erne liked Arthur almost as much as he detested Reuben, his behaviour was not quite so funereal.

Cecilia, being rich herself, was much admired by the Welwyn rich relations. She looked very handsome and wore her fine clothes, plumes and diamonds—too many iamonds—with graceful languor. Mr. Reuben drank

a great deal of wine, doubtless recalling the happy day when he was a bridegroom himself.

Laura looked her best, and talked about "my husband" before she had been Mrs. Arthur Welwyn for an hour. Her only feeling at leaving home was relief; her only regret that old Mrs. Welwyn was to live in the same house. The latter arrangement, however, did not trouble her much. She had quite made up her mind who was to be mistress.

The bride was affection itself to her newly acquired mother-in-law and other relations. She kissed all the uncles, aunts and cousins, and spent much of her time sitting beside her grandmother from Chertsey. Everybody said they were a perfect picture of youth and age. Laura divided her white flowers between the guests, giving the biggest rose to Mrs. Welwyn. (She was a little hurt afterwards to hear that the old lady had taken it to Kensal Rise Cemetery to adorn her late husband's tombstone.)

Laura said good-bye to her younger sister with great warmth.

"Now, mind, I want you to come and see me whenever you like, Belle, when I'm in my own house," she said.

Isobel was surprised at Lol thinking it necessary to give such an invitation. She would have gone as a matter of course. She was quick enough to suspect that Laura intended to assert herself as a married woman in her own house from the very start, but checked the thought as ungenerous. Cecilia had overheard the speech. She drew Isobel's hand through her little arm.

"If you're within a mile of my place, Belle, be sure you stop there!" she whispered the old joke, then it came to her turn to embrace Laura—"Good-bye, Lol, and good luck! You were always an old darling and I'm sure you'll be very happy."

"Good-bye, Cissy dear! Good-bye, Belle! Good-bye, dearest mama!" cried Laura—the last words to Mrs. Welwyn, not to her own mother—"Thank you all a thousand times."

She stepped into the carriage, showered with rice, not at all in a hurry to go away. After all, one can be married

only once, and every minute of a girl's reign on the day of bells is of priceless value

The bridegroom? Has nothing been written of the bridegroom?

Of course, he was there. Like the veil, the white frock, the flowers and other adornments of the bride, he did credit to her good taste and admirable choice.

CHAPTER III

ISOBEL ALONE

MRS. ERNE was ordering dinner.

This sentence suggests the attendance of her house-keeper and the arrangement of a number of courses, with an exchange of views on delicacies in and out of season, fruits that the head gardener would allow to be gathered, and the tastes of special guests to be studied.

It was Mrs. Erne herself who used the words, "ordering dinner." Liking such phrases, she frequently talked about "walking into the larder"—as if she was a fly—or "discussing the menu," or "settling upon the dessert." Isobel stood beside her bed, taking the orders. Her mother generally breakfasted in bed, for the simple reason she was too lazy to get up.

"You can hash the cold mutton and eke it out with sippets, boil some potatoes, and keep the twopen'orth of mixed pickles till to-morrow," said Mrs. Erne; "We will have a rich rice pudding to follow."

"Rich?" repeated Isobel, gloomily; "Am I to use three eggs, mother?"

"I think that two will be sufficient," returned Mrs. Erne, with dignity.

Isobel sighed as she carried her mother's breakfast tray downstairs. How she missed Laura's cheerful companionship in the kitchen! Laura liked cooking and shopping. That was strange enough to Isobel; it was stranger that Laura had not found the basement depressing. Isobel hated it, and all her mornings were necessarily spent there.

She looked like a different girl from the Isobel Erne whom Godfrey Strang had known at Lulwater, although it was only a year past. A taller girl, pale, more silent, something of the drudge in her repressed manner and roughened hands.

There had been no return to the lakes in the spring o' the year. Strang had written to urge it, but Mrs. Erne's shrill alarm at the expense of such a journey, twice in under twelve months, had frightened and angered the girl. Had her father known of her disappointment it would have ended. She trusted to her mother to speak of it to him and supposed, by his silence, he also disapproved.

Mrs. Erne had told him of the invitation, adding that the child was so indifferent it would be foolish to spend the money. To her the lie was snowy. To Isobel, when she heard of it in after years, it was black enough to shadow all her thoughts of her mother. Time lifted the shadow, it is true, but her love was never so bright again.

Isobel was continually thinking of the lost spring, as she worked through the hot summer in Fossingham Street. Strang was going abroad for the autumn and winter. There was no hope of seeing him in London.

Once she had met his sister, walking with her husband, in Kensington Gardens. Mrs. Clare's greeting was affectionate. Mr. Clare told her she had grown. Neither of them gave any hint of a desire to see her again.

It was not until they parted that the girl realized her excitement. It was as if she had been wafted to far Lulwater for a few bewildering minutes, talked and walked in the garden with two whom she remembered well, but was back again in London before she could find Strang.

If only the illusion had lasted a little longer, she knew he would have come striding up from the harbour—or appeared round the corner of Kensington Palace!

* * * * *

Isobel's life was as dull and uninteresting as Fossingham Street itself on a dark November day.

The independence of girls was becoming a possibility of the future, when she was seventeen, far from her present hour. She had no thought of leaving home to earn her living.

Mrs. Erne was proud of saying that both her elder daughters were nobly settled and the youngest would never have to do anything, thank Heaven. Henry Erne, the unobservant, thought as she did. Trying to keep

the house clean, cooking, darning, ironing, washing, and other domestic amusements were not to be confused with work. Isobel was so far ahead of her time as to smile when she heard that only men worked, while women played at being housewives.

A peculiar, but far from unique, barrier had stood between the girl and her father from the time when she changed from a loving, demonstrative child into an equally loving but reticent girl.

At first, she had accepted his silence, pre-occupation in his work, coldness to her mother and apparent indifference to herself and her sisters, as a matter of course. She supposed it was the way with fathers.

When she grew older, however, there had been many futile attempts to arouse his interest on her part, and half surprised, wholly ineffectual efforts to change the old habit of self-repression on his.

If Cecilia had tried to become a companion to the lonely man, her less sensitive, more courageous character would have spelt success where Isobel failed. But Cecilia was too self-absorbed, and left home too early, to forget her childish shrinking from his melancholy face and abstracted manner.

Laura did not care, nor pretend to care, for him in the least. She did her duty—Laura always did her duty however disagreeable to other people—by honouring his birthday with inappropriate presents, and making her young family (when the time came for her to have a young family) send him Christmas cards with affectionate messages which she dictated.

Isobel had tried to tell her father about Lulwater, but her personal knowledge of Godfrey Strang did not interest him. He could talk of Strang's books, not guessing that the girl cared so much less for them than for their writer.

Mrs. Erne knew nothing of books, except novels. In fiction she had no discrimination, and as greedy an appetite for cheap romance as a poor child for cheap sweets. Her only desire was to find out whether A. married B. or C. She boasted, as many people do, of being unable to read a story as its author penned it, beginning at the beginning and ending at the end.

"I look at the last pages to see what happens," said

Mrs. Erne; "Then I skim through to read the conversations."

She meant the scenes of love and passion, for she liked to imagine herself the heroine of wild adventures or dangerous situations. It enabled her to forget Fossingham Street and her elderly, eccentric husband.

There was only one sentiment they shared in common—amazement that they had ever married each other. He would have given the reason in one word, propinquity. They happened to lodge in the same house and work in the same shop when they were young. She would have told a tale of another lover, pique, the blind impulse of a reckless girl, etc. In her own words—she often confused their exact meanings—she had chosen wrongly after osculating between several admirers.

The estrangement between her father and mother had not affected Isobel while she was still a child and her sisters were at home. After Laura's marriage a new phase of her life began.

The household work was a heavy burden and she had to depend upon her parents for daily companionship. There was no Cissy to love and laugh with her; no Laura to help and advise.

While all her recollections of Lulwater were radiant with happiness Strang had so dominated her personality, albeit unconsciously, that she was like a being who had lived in another and fairer country, returning to her old surroundings only to be wounded and baffled at every turn. She suffered even physically, losing the first bloom of girlhood in a subtle way, before either her strength or beauty were matured.

When she did not look well Mrs. Erne told her to go to bed earlier; Mr. Erne said she should get up earlier. The former thought that meat was the great stengthener. The latter believed in vegetarianism. Mrs. Erne did not understand that mind is the ruler of the body. Mr. Erne had no idea that the poor child missed her sisters and yearned for her friend.

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While Isobel hashed the mutton and cut small triangles of bread to be toasted and called sippets—not any

particular mutton on any particular day, for it was the usual Wednesday end of the Sunday joint—she pondered on the possibility of spending the whole of her life in the kitchen at Fossingham Street. Her parents had celebrated their silver wedding, but they would probably live to see their golden. She calculated what her own age would be then.

There were two prospects of escape—marriage, or an improbable invitation to live with her aunt Althea. Alas! The unsolved mystery surrounding aunt Althea darkened her mind. She could not forget Laura's hints, emphasized by the fact that she had not seen aunt Althea's husband. She was always called Mrs. Roseglade, that Mr. Roseglade was the name of a mere shadow of a man.

No, she would never be allowed to live with aunt Althea. What of the other alternative? She occasionally thought of getting married, but vaguely and with no excitement.

Cecilia's money, house and new friends, did not attract Isobel; she had none of the ordinary girl's desire for wealth. Laura's beaming happiness and pride pleased her, but secret surprise was added to the pleasure whenever she saw Arthur Welwyn. Laura frequently declared he was a model. Isobel agreed with the mental addition of the words, of dullness.

In a word, this girl whom Godfrey Strang had loved—if only for an hour—was so virginal in thought and emotion that she did not understand the possibilities of love. In her veiled dreams it was beautiful, but unreal, and far from her wakeful hours.

* * * * *

Henry Erne was a maker of boxes. His was a peculiar, individual little business, of the kind to be found in odd corners of London perhaps more than any other city in Europe.

He made all kinds of boxes; boxes that resembled humanity in that every single one was a little different from every other; boxes for ornament and use; beautiful and plain; roughly put together, or finished as carefully

as a design for embroidery ; big and small, cheap and dear.

His knowledge of materials for his boxes was like his knowledge of books—odd, unscientific, elementary, but surprising at times by its true judgment of values. He was able to do carpentry and metal work. His hands were skilful and well trained, but his efforts were fitful. He did not care if the shop was opened at eight o'clock in the morning or eleven. He was too oppressed by a life of poverty to insist on good prices, often selling his wares at an absurdly low rate in dread of losing a customer.

His conduct was always inconsistent. Misunderstanding was at the root of the indifference, even dislike, that grew between Isobel and her father after her return from Lulwater. Had there been even an echo in her own home of the sympathy and affectionate kindness of Strang's house, she would never have known the isolation of spirit that is possible, and hardest to bear, among intimate faces.

It was Strang who taught Isobel to appreciate her father's work. Her sense of form and colour had been dormant until then. She had seen the boxes in course of making, and handled many of the materials when she was a small child.

There had been a time, as infrequently remembered as an old dream, when the two little girls, Laura and Isobel—Cecilia was too restless and impatient—had each worked at a low table seated in diminutive arm-chairs, pretending to make boxes with their father.

The children had known an exquisite pleasure in painting with real paints, opening and shutting feeble lids, and fitting make-believe keys. Their father had told them rambling stories in those days, adapted from legends and ballads of his boyhood. More than once Isobel found herself strangely familiar with lines and incidents in old poetry, and, while she was pondering the cause, a scene of childhood would sweep past her like a scent of rosemary on the wind—the shabby parlour behind the shop in Fossingham Street—bright colours—little hands at work—her father's monotonous voice—the glint of sunshine on Laura's brown curls.

One autumn day, when Isobel had been made happy by a letter from Godfrey Strang, she made a determined effort to help her father.

Mrs. Erne had gone to spend the day with Laura, lately returned from her honeymoon. Mr. Starling was shut into his half of the divided shop. There were not likely to be many customers on such a rainy afternoon.

Henry Erne was putting the finishing touches of colour to half a dozen of his wooden boxes which were shaped like marigolds.

Isobel came in with her resolution expressed in her face, a little nervous, but smiling too.

How round-backed and untidy her father looked! His spectacles had slipped half way down his nose. His once black velvet cap was brown and shiny with age. His suit was as rusty as an old, unused nail.

Isobel felt more than a touch of the impatience their father's shiftlessness aroused in both her sisters. Cecilia had offended him by discussing it. Laura was more tactful, but more contemptuous in what she said behind his back.

"Well?" said Henry Erne, without looking up.

His daughter stood just within the door, very doubtful of her reception.

"Mother hasn't come home yet," she said, feebly.

Mr. Erne was clearly not interested.

"I think I'd like to come and sit with you, father, if you don't mind. Perhaps—perhaps there's something I could do to help. Mother said you'd promised Mr. Gilmore to send those marigold boxes home before to-morrow night, and I——"

"For God's sake, shut the door!" interrupted her father, irritably; "If you want so much air, open the window, but don't stand there in the draught."

Isobel shut the door so very quickly that it banged.

"Oh, I'm sorry, father. I didn't mean to make such a noise."

She sat down on the opposite side of the table. Everything in the room was dusty and shabby, with the exception of the row of golden coloured boxes before him, and other specimens of his work in a big cabinet with glass doors.

He bent low over his paints. His hands were finely shaped, thin and veiny. There was a striking resemblance between his haggard face and the young, beautiful face of the girl; the same appealing curve in the lips, the same look of austerity in the wide set eyes; the same refinement in ears and nose, the same texture of skin. The man's hair was grizzled. Isobel did not remember him when it was dark and glossy as her own.

"Can't I do some of the painting of the petals, father dear?" she asked, after a minute's silence; "I'll be very careful."

"It's fiddling work. You won't enjoy it, Belle."

"I should like to help you to finish the job."

"I shall get finished in time. If I don't, Gilmore can't have it, that's all."

"It would give me so much pleasure to do a share, father."

"All right! You'd better come and sit in my place. It isn't light enough where you are. Take this brush—look out! Don't knock the water over."

"Oh, father! I didn't mean to disturb you like this," cried Isobel, in distress, as her father began to re-arrange the table for her convenience. She saw that his hands, so steady when she had watched them at work, were shaking.

"Now, I want you to lay on the colour very gingerly—sit down, sit down—and don't smudge it over the edges," was his only answer.

"Do I use the yellow ochre, father?"

"Yes—no—not entirely. I'll mix it for you. Cissy was the only one of you girls who had a good eye for shades of colour, but she was such a little devil—good heavens, Belle! Can't you see that's all lumpy? It's supposed to be a marigold, not a mangel-wurzel"

He went on muttering severe criticisms of her attempts in strong language.

"I should get on so much better if you didn't watch me, father. I'm always nervous when I'm overlooked."

"I thought you said Mr. Strang overlooked you all the time you were painting that water colour of harebells."

"Oh, yes! But he's so patient and quiet. He doesn't make a fuss or begin to swear——"

"I've always tried not to swear before you children. I suppose I've got to beg your pardon."

"Father! Don't talk like that. You hurt me."

"Nonsense! Well?"—after a pause—"Are you going on? If not, you might give me back my chair."

"Of course I'm going on. I shall soon get into the way of it, if you leave me alone."

Mr. Erne did not speak again. He began to paint another of the little boxes. Isobel thought he was covertly watching her and nervousness made her clumsy. It was nothing of the kind. He was absorbed in his own work. It was only when she made a despairing exclamation that he noticed her poor progress.

"It's no use, father. I shall spoil your work. I'm so stupid!" she said.

"No, you're not stupid, you're ignorant and you're conceited. You think there's nothing to be learned in trifles like this," rejoined her father, coolly pulling the paints and unfinished attempt across the table; "Now, why are you looking so miserable?"

"I wanted to help you."

"My dear, if any of you had wanted to help me I should have been only too pleased to teach," said Mr. Erne, his melancholy eyes raised for a minute to her face; "You all appear to agree with your mother that it's very foolish to fiddle over these things when one can buy them at half the price at a box factory—as she thinks."

"I don't agree with her in the least!" exclaimed Isobel; "Your handiwork is finer than any machine can turn out. You know it is, father."

"Not at all. Boxes can be made much better by machinery, more even, more compact, in greater quantities at half the outlay," said Mr. Erne.

"Then why do you do them by hand?" asked Isobel bluntly.

"Because there are a few people who prefer my failures to wholesale successes."

"Father, I wish you wouldn't disparage yourself. You're always doing it."

Mr. Erne went on tinting the marigold petals, softly

whistling. He nodded, or shook his head when Isobel tried to talk, not troubling to answer.

The habit of more or less ignoring her father was not to be broken in one afternoon. After a while she fell into silence, hurt by her failure, vainly racking her brains for the right words to speak. She hoped that he was aware of her distress. He glanced at her now and again, kindly as she thought, but when he spoke at last it was evident that he did not care.

"I shall go to Wimbledon to-morrow, if it clears up, for the whole day."

"On your cycle?" asked Isobel, swallowing her disappointment.

"Yes. I always go on my cycle."

"Do you ever think about us when you're alone, all the long days you go out cycling, father?"

Mr. Erne looked a little surprised at the question.

"Yes—oh, yes, of course," he replied, doubtfully.

"You never wanted us girls to go with you."

Mr. Erne looked very much surprised this time.

"Such an idea was never suggested. It wouldn't have answered, my dear. I like to meander along in my own way. Cissy was too impatient and fond of sight-seeing, and Laura couldn't have done without her regular midday meal. Oh, no, it wouldn't have answered in the least."

"What of me, father?"

Isobel spoke eagerly, bending over the table. One loving word—even a smile or an out-stretched hand—and the barrier between Henry Erne and his child would have broken down in the rush of her gratitude and affection.

He drew back at the sight of her agitated face, dreading tears and reproaches, with a vague recollection of her mother's habit of crying without cause in her early days; he was still annoyed with the girl for her bad painting; he had no perception of her earnestness.

"If you'll only take me with you, father, I'll go wherever you like. I'm different from Cissy and Laura. I shall be quite happy with you—do, do say you'd like me to go."

"Now, for heaven's sake, don't get hysterical!" he

exclaimed, pushing the boxes on one side and rising to pace the floor.

"I'm not hysterical!" cried Isobel, hurt and angry in a moment.

"Don't you know I've got my work to finish?" asked her father; "Why can't you leave me in peace?"

"Oh, father! Am I never to come into the room—never—while you're at work?"

"No, never! Understand that. There was a time when you might have helped me, you children, but it's over. I'm like a dying man—beyond help, beyond affection, beyond remorse."

"Father! Father!"

"It's no good, Isobel. You can't undo the past. Better keep out of my way and try to forget me. You're a fool to make yourself miserable over your parents' troubles. Take a leaf out of your mother's book. Don't expect anything from me except the money I can earn—and that's little enough, God knows!"

Isobel shrank against the wall, while he blurted out the disjointed sentences with a bitterness and smouldering rage that shook her with fear, not so much at what he said but the violence of a passion she had never seen in him before.

She could not speak. Her white, childish face was amazingly like and unlike the face of the man, distorted as it was. He had no idea that his terrible expression was stamped upon her memory, for he looked at her only once for a flashing moment.

A storm of words, long pent, rushed from his lips. Regardless of Isobel, the secret disgust at his own futility, resentment against the woman whom he had married, disappointment in his children, all the egotism and brooding thoughts of many years took form in the torrent, swept from his brain and heart in momentary madness.

It was soon over. He sank into his chair, and rubbed his forehead and mouth with his handkerchief. Then he began to fidget with the boxes and paints, pushing them about, aimlessly clearing spaces on the table. When he took up his brush his hands were so shaky that he could not steady it, although he tried again and again to finish the petals.

"There! You see how you've upset me!" he exclaimed, speaking at Isobel, but not looking towards her; "I shan't get this job done by to-morrow night. That means I must work on Sunday, instead of going to Wimbledon."

Isobel did not dare to offer her help again. She looked at the distance between herself and the door, longing to get away. The sound of her mother's key at the side door gave her a thrill of gratitude. Her father heard it too.

"Don't stop here any longer, Belle, and don't interrupt me again," he said, as she made a movement, half appealing, half frightened, towards him.

So she went out of the room without another word.

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Mrs. Erne slowly climbed the stairs to the sitting room. She dropped into an arm chair and stretched out her feet for Isobel to unlace her boots.

"I'm dog-tired!" she said, with a great yawn.

"Have you been out of doors all day?" asked Isobel.

"No. Laura had a fire lit in the drawing room after we'd had our lunch, and we both sat in front of it for the whole of the afternoon. I scorched my skirt, it was so hot. I don't know why I feel so worn out——" with another jaw-cracking yawn—"but I do."

"You must go to bed early to-night," said her daughter.

"I believe I will," answered Mrs. Erne, wriggling her toes released from the pointed boots; "What's the matter with you, Belle? You look like a ghost."

Isobel tried to laugh, began a sentence, stopped, and then threw her arms round her mother's neck and sobbed out the story of the afternoon.

Mrs. Erne was not sympathetic. She could not imagine why the girl was so unhappy. It was her own fault. She knew that her father had a fiendish temper.

"I've put up with it agreeably for nearly twenty-eight years, my dear, and you must school yourself to do the same," said Mrs. Erne, pushing Isobel away.

Isobel had often heard this argument, but she was old enough to question its fairness. Her mother's duty was

not her own, and had Mrs. Erne put up with her husband quite so agreeably as she asserted ?

As she had seen her father with new eyes, in his anger, so she looked at her mother now. She noticed for the first time the thin lips of a shrew, the peculiar, little sharp dints in her fine nostrils, the too long, obstinate line of her chin ; altogether there was a suggestion of a cruel bird of prey in the sallow face.

At the same time, the daughter discovered that she was gaining weight. Her best silk blouse looked too tight. Her hands, with their tapering, feeble fingers, were certainly less bony than of yore.

"Don't cry any more, Belle," said Mrs. Erne, with a careless kiss ; "I'm sure it's nearly time for supper. We had a piece of salmon for our lunch. Laura gave three and six a pound. It was delicious ! Oh, dear ! My girls have done better in the world than I did," sighed Mrs. Erne ; "Cissy's got everything she wants, and Laura's got a beautiful little home. If only you can catch a rich man too, I shall be jealous of you all, Belle."

After supper Isobel stopped in her own room all the evening. Her father, who had not spoken during the meal, was reading in the sitting room. Her mother had gone to bed.

The girl put on her winter coat, for the autumn night was very chilly and rain spluttered against the window.

She read Godfrey Strang's whimsical, affectionate letter several times. It was short enough to learn by heart in five minutes ; Isobel liked to dwell upon every curve and angle of his handwriting. She held the ring he had given her in the palm of her hand. It was nearer so, she felt, than on her finger.

Thinking of him, the events of the afternoon shocked and grieved her. What would he say to it all—her father's rage, her mother's indifference—in his quiet house ? If she could only go to him for an hour and tell him of her loneliness, her yearning to get away from home.

Home ! This was her home, this dreary place ; this empty room ; these long, unhappy days with a man and woman who cared for her so little.

Cecilia's bed had been gone for years, but Laura's was

still there. Isobel knelt down on the floor beside it and laid her head where the pillow had rested.

"I do want you, Lol! I do want you, Cissy! I do want you both so much!" she moaned, childishly, again and again, even forgetting her ring and Strang's letter.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. BENJAMIN REUBEN AND MRS. ARTHUR WELWYN

ISOBEL had not seen much of her sister Cecilia during the first years of the latter's married life. She and her husband went abroad for his summer holidays. Their house in Hampstead was rather a long journey from Bayswater.

Mrs. Reuben occasionally swooped down upon Fossingham Street, not to carry anything away, but to scatter largess in the form of sweets, fruit, wine or flowers.

Cissy was a wonder to Isobel in those days. Her dresses were made in the latest fashion; expensive suède gloves, seen and coveted in shop windows, crinkled to her elbows; always fond of scent, she had learned to use the very faintest and sweetest white heliotrope or wood violet. More amazing still, her once untidy, luxuriant hair was puffed and curled. Her lips (so Laura declared) were touched to a brighter hue and her complexion was brushed over with fine powder.

Cecilia's husband never honoured Fossingham Street with his presence, unless a few minutes' impatient waiting for Cecilia, on their way to some other place, could be called a visit. He was cordial to his sisters-in-law when they appeared at his house, although he criticized their clothes, manners and friends too freely for Laura's independence and Isobel's pride.

He was rarely mentioned by Cecilia, her family's interest beginning and ending with a conventional enquiry after his health.

When Isobel returned from Lulwater, and after Laura's marriage, the eldest sister began to entreat the youngest to spend all her spare time at Hampstead.

Cecilia had made a great many new friends, rather after the method of a stamp collector when he first

begins, accepting anybody that came her way in hope of exchanging for better specimens later on.

The majority of her neighbours were young married women, with children. She had no children, declared she did not want them, and sought for companionship farther afield.

Isobel was unable to account for her sister's ever widening circle. The men were few, too youthful or too old, and the women seemed to have nothing to do.

As these doubtful friends looked upon North-West London as quite inaccessible, Cecilia did her share—a very big share too—of entertaining at the house of a certain Mrs. Jacobs in Chelsea.

Mrs. Jacobs's husband appeared to be a modern Wandering Jew. He was always reported as being on his way to England from different foreign ports, but he never arrived. Mrs. Jacobs arranged little lunches, dinners and expeditions, and Mrs. Reuben paid the bills. They called each other "Gertie" and "Cis," and were an admirable contrast in appearance, Gertie being of the wax doll, flaxen-haired type of beauty.

Whenever Isobel went to the Reubens' house she found Cecilia preparing for, or resting after, some pleasure hunt with her new friend.

"You seem to do nothing except enjoy yourself, Cissy!" said Isobel, who was visiting at Hampstead on a winter afternoon.

"You're wrong there, dearie. I was dining last night with my brother and sister-in-law, and on Saturday there was a family gathering here to celebrate the silver wedding of some more of 'em. Do you call that enjoyment?" answered Cecilia.

"Perhaps not, but next week you're going to the theatre with Mrs. Jacobs, to supper with the Rowleys, a bachelor dance at Billy Flaxman's, a card party at Mrs. Stillworth's, and——"

"My dear child! How on earth do you know all that?" interrupted Cecilia.

"You've happened to mention it at different times to-day, Cissy."

"What a memory the chit's got!" exclaimed her sister, laughing; "Do you know you're a little deceiver,

Belle ? You sit there, so silent and solemn with your big eyes, as if you didn't notice anything. Laura always says you're more profound than we suspect. I'm inclined to think she's right."

"Didn't she say I was sly ? I'm sure she wouldn't think anybody profound, except Arthur. It doesn't sound like Lol."

"Not sly exactly—deep—cunning—I don't remember the word. It doesn't matter. Seriously, Belle, I can't make you out," continued Cecilia, leaning back against the velvet cushions of her chair, her hands behind her head, her lustrous eyes narrowed on her little sister's face ; "You're not a bit lazy, like mother and me, or sulky like father, or aggressively cheerful like Laura. Are you happy ? Don't you ache to get away from Fossingham Street ? I did."

"Yes, sometimes I want to get away so much I'm—I'm—positively homesick for a strange place, Cissy. Does that sound stupid ?"

"No, dear. I understand."

"I know it's absurd, Cissy. If you're not happy in yourself, a change of place, or people, makes no great difference when the novelty's worn off."

"Have you found that out so early ?" asked Cecilia, changing her attitude to bend over the fire, looking into it.

"Then, when you've had a great disappointment in life it seems to make you callous or brave—I don't know which it is—over trifles."

"Have you had a great disappointment in life, Belle ?" said Cecilia, with a sudden darkening of her face into anxious perplexity.

"Yes. It is over two years since I went to Lulwater. I was to return the following spring. I feel now that I shall never go back."

The perplexity passed like a cloud from the brightness of Cecilia's face.

"Is that your great disappointment in life ? Oh, Belle ! Belle !" and she began to laugh.

"I'm not surprised that you think it absurd," replied Isobel, calmly ; "Very few people could understand how perfectly happy I was at Lulwater. No, even happy

is not quite the right word—" she too looked into the fire, pondering before she ended her sentence slowly—" I think it was realization of the possibilities in myself. I was so thoughtful there, and keen, and unselfish. I knew my ideals were right and worth while. Now I so often lose them."

"Laura and I never had any ideals," said Cecilia; "Since I was fourteen I began to plot and plan to escape from home. May sound horrid, but it's true. I don't know when I made up my mind marriage would be the easiest way. It must have been after I was engaged to that tall man with the fair beard——"

"Cissy! Were you ever engaged to the French hairdresser?" cried Isobel, vaguely remembering Cecilia's first affair of the heart.

"No! Poor old sentimental Louis was not the only tall man with a fair beard in London," said Cecilia; "You never knew about this one. He saw me first in the shop—like Ben—and I used to meet him under the cedars, near the Broad Walk, in Kensington Gardens—again like Ben—but it turned out he hadn't any money. He was a singer, or something. He said his family was rich, but what was the good of that? You never saw such a handsome man, Belle. If I hadn't been so very young I shouldn't have had the strength of mind to get rid of him."

Cecilia kept smiling to herself for a little while, turning her rings round and round on her fingers.

"I thought it was when people are very young that they have the strength of mind to marry for love," said Isobel.

"That's a popular error, Belle. Girls are much stronger willed, where men are concerned, than older women. A sensible girl of twenty knows her own value. A woman of thirty doesn't. When they're forty—well, that's the worst age of all. Supposing I was to meet that singer now, though I'm still a long way off thirty, I should be sorely tempted to risk my future with him, rich or poor."

"If you were not married, Cissy."

"Of course, if I was not married."

Cecilia jumped up, suddenly throwing off her lethargy.

"I must go and get dressed," she said; "We're going out to dinner this evening."

"It won't take you two hours to get dressed," said Isobel.

"Yes, it will. You know how I dawdle. I should like to be ready for once before Ben. He makes such a fuss when I keep him waiting."

"How tiring for Ben to dress and go out again when he gets home so late from his business," observed Isobel, following her sister upstairs.

"He won't care. He dislikes dining at home as much as I do. Besides, we're going to his partner's house. One can be sure of the wine there—it's their own."

There was a good fire in Cecilia's bedroom, but she promptly shovelled more coals into the grate.

"How we longed for a bit of fire in our top floor front at home, didn't we, Belle? D'you remember crying when you couldn't break the ice in the water jug with your tooth-brush?"

"Yes, and Lol used to run downstairs to make a flat iron hot on the gas-stove, after father had gone to bed, and bring it up to keep your feet warm. Lol was a kind old thing, though she *would* hang texts on the wall," said Isobel; "She was so angry when we laughed at her for putting one over the washstand about 'wash me and I shall be clean.' Lol said it was beautifully appropriate."

"Sit down in one of the big chairs, Belle," said Cecilia; "Or you can lie on the bed if you like. Just turn the key in the lock, there's a dear, before you make yourself comfortable. Ben has a trick of bursting into this room without knocking. You'll find a box of sweets in that drawer behind you. Eat them up. I wish you would."

Isobel silently compared her sister's room with the chief guest-room at Lulworth House. The taste and simplicity of the latter made Cecilia's choice of ornaments look garish and startling in the girl's eyes.

The chief pieces of furniture had been there before Cecilia's time; they were handsome and unwieldy. Bright coloured cushions, gay pictures, photographs in fancy frames, dozens of expensive, useless knick-knacks had very much the same effect as modern jewellery would have had on the costume of a quakeress.

There was a tortoiseshell set on the dressing table, bottles of scent, powder boxes, rings, a handful of loose silver, handkerchiefs, and any number of worthless trifles. Expensive, showy clothes filled the wardrobe to overflowing. There was a hat on one chair, half a dozen pairs of shoes kicked out of the way into a corner; the open drawers were stuffed with lacey under-garments, gloves, silk scarves, petticoats, and tumbled blouses. An evening dress, pink, flouncey and flowery, lay upon the bed.

"Isn't it in a shocking muddle!" exclaimed Cecilia; "I ought to have a maid. If I've said that to Ben once, when he swears at my untidiness, I've said it a hundred times."

"I suppose a maid is very expensive," said Isobel.

"That doesn't matter. He finds money for everything he wants for himself, but he grudges me every shilling I spend, unless it's on food for the house."

"Oh, Cissy, how can you say that? He's always buying you presents. Look at your clothes, and flashing diamond engagement ring. I can see its lovely colours across the room."

Cecilia laughed scornfully.

"My dear, Ben killed two birds with one precious stone. That ring belonged to his first wife, so did the ruby and pearl bracelets—I thought they were horribly old-fashioned at the time—and the horse-shoe brooch and those emerald ear-rings."

She stopped brushing her hair and turned round from the looking glass to speak more emphatically.

"Belle! This house is haunted by the ghost of another woman. If I had been an ordinary, sentimental bride the idea would have maddened me, but it only made me smile. Everything was just as she left it, even the arrangement of this room. Upon my word, Belle, when I was late for dinner I used to expect to find her sitting opposite to him at the table, and I'll swear I've heard the rustle of her skirts on the stairs."

"Cissy! You make me turn cold."

"How sensitive you are, dearie. It interested me, that's all, and the impression is wearing off. I used to wish, I confess, that the first Mrs. Reuben had managed

to die somewhere else instead of in that bed, or, better still, not to die at all. Wouldn't that shock old Lol? Don't you repeat it, child."

She stood still for a minute, frowning at her own reflection in the glass. Isobel saw how her colour changed at some unspoken thought, for her face slowly turned red, the hot flush passing from cheeks to throat, even to her breast under the loose dressing gown.

She glanced sharply at Isobel. The girl instinctively lowered her eyes. After a few seconds Cecilia went on with her preparations. She did her hair elaborately; powdered and perfumed; put on silk stockings and shoes with ridiculously high heels; and finally Isobel helped her into the pink dress.

"Oh, Cissy! You *are* handsome!" exclaimed Isobel, when all was done, in an ecstasy of admiration.

As she spoke there was a rattle at the door handle, followed by a loud knock. It was Reuben. They had heard him in the adjoining dressing-room, splashing water, muttering to himself, and occasionally humming snatches of a popular music hall song.

"That's Ben. You can open the door," said Cecilia, as she put on her cloak and gathered up her gloves.

Isobel opened the door on a second impatient tap-tap-tap.

"I didn't know you were here, Belle. All right, eh?" said Reuben with a smile.

He bent forward and Isobel turned her ear towards him. She never could understand why he thought it necessary to kiss his sisters-in-law when they met, but he generally did, apparently indifferent to their lack of response.

"I see you're ready for a wonder!" Reuben went on, to his wife; "I wish you could persuade Belle to come and live here as a glorified lady's maid. She seems to be able to make you punctual. Is that your new gown? Let's look at it. Throw back your cloak."

Cecilia obeyed him, standing perfectly still with her long gloves hanging from her right hand, the left raised to her necklace. He looked at her from head to foot, slowly, appraisingly.

Isobel could not read her expression. It seemed to

ask for his approval, but there was scorn and pride in it too.

"Charming ! Charming !" exclaimed Reuben ; " Quite worth the money whatever was paid for it. Charming ! "

" The gown or the wearer ? " asked his wife.

He made a little sound of protest.

" What a question, Cissy ! The wearer's priceless, isn't she, Belle ? Quite ready, dear ? I hear the carriage. Come along ! Come along ! "

Cecilia followed him slowly downstairs. She lingered on the bottom step, talking to Isobel. Reuben put on his hat and coat and stood at the door, looking towards them. He did not speak, but his sister-in-law could see his irritation in the expression of his face and little, jerky movements of his body.

Cecilia often said that he hated to be kept waiting. Nothing annoyed him more.

His lips moved, but Isobel did not hear what he said, as his wife at last got into the carriage. Cecilia made a quick retort. He spoke to the coachman, followed her and slammed the door, forgetting to wave good-night to his sister-in-law with his usual veneer of courtesy.

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In the following week Isobel went to see her other sister.

A day spent with Cecilia Reuben was like a morning on the Lulwater fells, with brilliant sunshine and fresh winds, albeit there was a stormy sky behind the blue.

A day with Laura Welwyn was like an afternoon in the Lulwater valleys, warm and sheltered, with balmy air.

Old Mrs. Welwyn lived with her son and daughter-in-law. A less equable and persistent person than Laura would have found it impossible to avoid friction.

Laura declared with truth that she never quarrelled, never nagged, never lost her temper. Her method of ousting Mrs. Welwyn from any real authority in the house was not altogether selfish ; she honestly believed that the old lady's working and managing days were over. She liked her to get up late and go to bed early ; without resenting any household interference, Laura

smiled, agreed with all her mother-in-law said, and then did exactly as she pleased.

Whatever Mrs. Welwyn offered to do Laura stopped her with an affectionate—"I'll attend to that, mama dear," or "That's my little duty, mama dear," or "It's much too hard for you, mama dear."

At first Mrs. Welwyn had thanked her for her thoughtfulness; then she mildly rebelled; then she was angry, then she was tearful. Laura endured all the phases with equanimity. Obstinacy, combined with a little kindness and a great deal of self-righteousness, is generally at the root of endurance in domestic life.

On the day when Isobel went to visit her sister, in Aberdeen Gardens, old Mrs. Welwyn was not at home. She had gone to perform a monthly, harmless kind of suttee at Kensal Rise.

Isobel found Laura darning her husband's socks. Although none of the Erne girls had been taught to sew, the two elder sisters were equally clever with their needles in different ways. Cecilia could trim hats and make effective dresses when she chose. Laura had no invention, but her plain work was excellent.

"Hard at it, Lol?" said Isobel, kissing her.

"This is what it means to be a married woman!" rejoined the beaming Laura; "Take off your things, Belle. Have you brought any work?"

Isobel laughed.

"What a question to ask me! Did we ever 'bring our work' when we went out to tea?"

"No. I'm afraid mother didn't encourage us to be industrious when we were young," said Laura.

"You talk as if you'd been away from home for twenty years, instead of two months, Lol."

"Do you know, I've found out that one can't measure one's feelings by time," said Laura, duly impressed by the originality of the remark; "I feel as if I'd been married for an age. Arthur says the same. Isn't it extraordinary?"

"Then Fossingham Street seems a very long way off?" said Isobel.

"I don't think a married woman should try to forget her childish associations," returned Laura; "At the

same time there are some things in my old life I don't want to remember. None of us can be sorry to leave Fossingham Street. That's why Cissy was in such a hurry to get married."

"She was engaged as long as you were, Laura."

"Not officially, my dear. Of course she's very fond of Ben, now he's her husband, but I don't think they can be as happy as Arthur and I. We're such a perfect match!" said Laura, as if they were a coat and skirt bought at different shops.

"I suppose father and mother were a perfect contrast," observed Isobel.

"Exactly. I don't want to blame either of them, but I do wish they'd each married somebody else, Belle. That isn't grammar, is it? Arthur is so particular over the way one speaks, but you know what I mean."

"Would you rather have belonged to father and his other wife, or to mother and her other husband?" asked Isobel.

Laura meditated over the problem, while she diligently searched for holes in Arthur's new silk socks.

"Father," was her final choice; "He's a morose, difficult disposition, but mother is so hopelessly shiftless. When she came the other day her shoes were not a pair and she'd inked her heels to hide the holes in her stockings. That isn't a nice thing to do, is it? Besides, the ink always rubs off, so it's no good," concluded Laura.

"I ought to mend her things, but there's so much work every day, Laura," sighed Isobel.

"Not at all. Don't you be a little simpleton. Cissy and I understand mother better than you do. She's a strong, healthy woman, quite able to do her own sewing."

"I doubt if she is so healthy, Lol. Her hands are so feeble and she can't walk any distance."

"Of course not, she won't take any exercise. Now, I make it a rule to tramp about in Kensington Gardens every day, if it's only down the Broad Walk and back, and I often go to meet Arthur in the evening. She and father might go out together after the shop's shut."

"Father goes out on his bicycle. Do you think mother could sit on the handle-bars, Lol?"

"What an idea!" exclaimed Laura, taking it seriously;

"He might leave his cycle at home sometimes. One must give and take in married life. Arthur and I have often said that is one of the secrets of our happiness."

"Will you always be as happy as you are now, Laura?"

Isobel looked into her sister's face, comparing its placidity with Cecilia's play of expression—fair to stormy, gay to sad.

"It won't be my fault if my marriage is not a great success," said Laura, solemnly; "I've made up my mind to do my duty. Marriage is what you make it. If Arthur and I ever separated—what a dreadful idea!—it would be such a consolation to know that one had always been in the right."

"It isn't possible, when people quarrel, for one to be always in the right and the other always in the wrong, Laura."

"I'm not talking about 'people,' Isobel, but husbands and wives. I think it's quite possible always to be in the right if one does one's duty. It's easy for me, because Arthur is such a model. I don't want to exaggerate, but I do believe he's the noblest creature that ever breathed. I had no idea how strong and deep a man's nature could be until we were married—and he's always punctual for meals."

Isobel laughed before she could stop herself. Laura was not offended. As she said to her husband afterwards, perhaps her talk was a little too profound for a young unmarried girl to understand.

The noblest creature that ever breathed came home at his usual time, with a filleted sole from a city shop as an offering for his bride.

Arthur was tall and pale, with curly light brown hair and the neatest of small moustaches; pleasant to meet, conventional, kind, ordinary; rather languid, as if the G.P.O. absorbed too much of his vitality.

Isobel had the sense to appreciate his evident pride in Laura and admiration of her pretty, busy ways. It became him very well. He had married a penniless girl against the advice of his relatives—his mother, two uncles and a bachelor cousin had been consulted—and he was naturally elated at the good impression she had already made on the family.

Mrs. Welwyn came home a few minutes after her son. Visits to Kensal Rise made her pessimistic and inclined to be tearful.

Laura insisted on her mother-in-law going to bed directly after dinner. Isobel saw that the old lady wished to sit up until her usual hour. Arthur showed his masculine wisdom by refusing to give an opinion either way, leaving the ladies to settle it between them.

As Mrs. Welwyn senior became more determined to play her game of Patience in the drawing-room, Mrs. Welwyn junior became more anxious that she should retire. After being told a dozen times that she was over-tired, Mrs. Welwyn began to believe it. It was not unpleasing to be the object of such affectionate, if slightly depressing, care. So it ended by her taking advice so officiously repeated and, having got her own way, Laura went upstairs with her, carrying a hot-water bottle.

It was not until the gas was turned out, and a night light gleaming in the darkness, that she felt a touch of compunction.

"You're sure to go to sleep now, aren't you, mama dear?" said Laura.

"I hope not, or I shall wake too early in the morning," said Mrs. Welwyn, with a sigh.

"It's better to wake early, you know, than not to rest in the first part of the night," replied Laura, cheerfully.

She went downstairs with the smiling report that she was sure dear mama would soon drop off and sleep till they called her in time for breakfast.

The remainder of the evening was spent in Arthur trying over the principal songs in several light operas, accompanied by his wife, with not infrequent pauses for mild love making.

Isobel sat by the fire, entreated by Laura at intervals to have another cushion, or put her feet on the fender, or look at a book if the music bored her. She was bound to be home by half past ten, or her father would storm and her mother miss the cup of hot milk taken as a sleeping potion.

It was warm and very comfortable in the little drawing room, looking far prettier in shaded gaslight than by day; Arthur's voice was pleasant to hear, and Laura, thanks

to her rejected and forgotten first love, the music master, played the piano with intelligence. Isobel dreaded the dark, cheerless house in Fossingham Street. She had lost hope of her father's confidence. Her mother was daily becoming more of an invalid.

Looking furtively at her sister and brother-in-law, during one of their interludes of whispering and holding hands, it struck her that getting married was a good solution of the home problem. It was a feeling that passed quickly in the thought it awakened. She was ashamed and contemptuous of herself. It was only possible to marry if one loved.

Isobel told herself that she had already loved, but with no desire to marry. Godfrey Strang was still so infinitely dear to her that she could not imagine any man approaching him in her heart, or any love more absorbing than the tenderness she felt for him.

Lulwater was fresh in her mind, although her vivid recollections were beginning to drift into one another, as the cloudy mists of fell and stream drift together over the lake.

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Laura and Arthur took her to the door when it was time to go. Arthur made a feint of reaching for his hat and overcoat, with a murmured offer to see her home. Isobel declared she would go alone. Laura begged her husband to remember his throat—as if it was something he was in the habit of leaving behind—and the little argument ended with the visitor hurrying off by herself.

The back streets Isobel passed through were empty, except for one noisy crowd at the doors of a public-house. As she turned down her own road a man stepped out of the shadow of the brick wall surrounding the old garden.

He raised his hat awkwardly, and she recognised him. It was George Starling, the son of Mr. Starling who shared her father's house and shop.

"May I have the pleasure of escorting you home, Miss Is'bel?" said the young man, so promptly that she was right in suspecting he had rehearsed the little speech before he met her.

"Thank you, George."

"You're rather later than I ex——than you was the other night," said Mr. George.

She had an uncomfortable feeling that he had been waiting for her.

Mr. Starling, junior, had lately shown an inclination to lurk in the shadow of the brick wall when Isobel was not at home in the evening. It looked bad, especially as he always put on his new overcoat.

They walked along Fossingham Street in silence. George Starling glanced sideways at his companion now and again. She took no notice of the glances.

"It's warmer than it was——at least, I mean a little cooler," said Mr. George at last; "I think it's in the north to-night."

"What is in the north?" asked Isobel.

"The win'," said Mr. George.

He was a good-looking young man, though a trifle undersized. The right side of his amiable face had a screwed, wrinkled appearance, as if he meant to wink. It was the result of continually holding a watchmaker's magnifying glass to his eye.

Mr. Starling, senior, had begun to teach George his trade at an age when he had to be lifted on to the high stool. He was skilful, and so steady a workman that his father often remarked that the boy was like a bit o' clockwork himself. This, Mr. Starling considered, was the highest praise to be given to any man.

Isobel was tired and dispirited, or she would have been more lenient to her old friend, for she had known George Starling all her life. She did not speak to him until they were at the door of No. 14.

"I hope you were not waiting for me, George," she said, severely.

"Yes—no—I thought of going for a blow on a bus——" stammered the surprised George.

"Well, please don't wait again. I like coming home by myself."

"Miss Is'bel——" began the young man and stopped, either unable to express himself, or because he had nothing to express.

Isobel opened the door with her key.

"Good-night, George."

She ran upstairs, leaving George Starling to shut and bolt the door. She had forgotten him and his unwelcome escort in five minutes.

Poor young George, lying awake in a gloomy back kitchen in the basement, spent a thoughtful hour in calculating the expense of furnishing apartments for two in a high-class locality—say, Kentish Town—in anticipation of the day when Miss Is'bel should reward his constancy.

CHAPTER V

ISOBEL'S SECOND MEETING WITH HESKETH

It was four years since Isobel returned from Lulwater. Every summer she had hoped to go back ; every summer she had been disappointed.

If Cecilia had known the intensity of her longing, she would have gladly given the necessary money ; Laura, almost as gladly, would have offered to look after their parents during her absence. Isobel was strangely silent on the subject of greatest interest in her life as a girl.

Her nature was not secretive, but love—even from its first, most innocent approach—found her introspective and sensitive. She was finely balanced, neither restless and ambitious of power like Cecilia, nor ready to be absorbed in domesticity like Laura.

Cissy never realised the subtleties nor possibilities of love ; Lol did not believe in them. With the latter it was but one step from seeing the eligible man to becoming his wife. Cissy had trampled on her doubts and hesitations. Lol had never felt any.

To the majority of girls, George Starling would have proved either a distraction, a diversion, or a temptation to love. He lived in the same house ; he was only three-and-twenty years old ; he was simple and adoring. Isobel never thought about him. Cecilia let well alone, rarely mentioning his name. Laura gave what she called a slight, timely warning.

"As Cissy and I have pulled the family out of the gutter, Belle, I hope you're not going to disgrace it," was her not altogether tactful way of dropping a hint.

"I didn't know our family was in the gutter," replied Isobel ; "How do you expect I am going to disgrace you and Cissy ?"

Laura moderated her tone.

"Well, you mustn't follow the example of that foreign prince Arthur was speaking about—you must not make a *mésalliance*."

"How grand that sounds!" laughed Isobel; "Do you suspect me of anything so unbecoming the house of Erne, 14 Fossingham Street, top bell."

"I'm serious, Isobel. Starling may be all very well as a lodger, but not as a husband."

"Surely you don't think I'm going to marry an elderly man, like Mr. Starling, with no hair on his head?"

"Don't pretend to be stupid, my dear. Of course I mean the son, George as you call him."

"You called him George yourself for many years, Laura—shall we say before you met the G.P.O.?"

Laura treated this remark with the scorn it deserved.

"You mustn't let him talk you into an engagement, Isobel."

"He could never do that, for he doesn't talk about anything except the weather."

"Girls are so silly," continued Laura; "They believe in any man who flatters them. I never guessed what deceivers men were until I married Arthur."

"That sounds bad, Lol. What has poor Arthur done?" asked Isobel.

"That's not a very proper thing to say, Isobel," returned Laura severely; "I was speaking of bachelors. No girl can expect to understand men until she has the full confidence of a husband. Then he tells her how bad the other men are."

"Does he? All husbands are not alike, are they, Lol? I mean, there's Arthur and the other sort."

"Never you mind about my husband, Belle. Take care of your own."

"I haven't got one."

"I mean, take care it isn't young George Starling."

"It's kind of you to give me such good advice, Laura, but very unnecessary," said the younger sister, with sudden pride.

"Oh, well, you needn't be offended. If you were a little more open and less stuck up I should know what was going on. You never talk to me confidentially, and

it wouldn't enter your head to consult Arthur. Don't say I haven't warned you, that's all. George Starling indeed!" said Laura scornfully; "You'll be taking up with a man named Bullfinch next, or Cock Robin!"

Isobel not giving any answer, Laura could only end the confidential talk by telling her she was as obstinate as her father and as stupid as her mother.

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Isobel's greatest pleasure at this time was in rare visits to aunt Althea.

The girl had put out of her mind, as far as she could, Laura's assertion that Mrs. Roseglade—the aunt was known as Mrs. Roseglade—had not been legally married.

She was hurt and amazed to discover that her mother seemed anxious for the grandmother at Chertsey to believe the scandal. It never dawned upon Isobel that the old lady's little property was supposed to be hanging in the balance. If her daughter Althea was not married, Mrs. Erne hoped and believed the said Althea would be disinherited. Several affectionate relatives held the same opinion. It was, therefore, to their general interest to keep Althea's supposed iniquity before Chertsey gran'ma's eyes.

Plain speaking would probably have settled the matter, but Althea chose to ignore her relatives' curiosity; nobody was quite sure of Chertsey gran'ma's opinion, and the only man in the case—Henry Erne declaring himself neutral—was Mr. Roseglade, on whom none of the elder ladies in the family, to quote Mrs. Erne, had ever clapped their mortal eyes.

Aunt Althea lived in an old-fashioned, quaint, rambling house, in a square of similar houses, somewhere along the river between Kew and Mortlake.

It should have been called St. Mark's Oblong, not Square, judging by the shape of the strip of land the people owned in common—not exactly a garden, although the Roseglades and others had planted it with bright flowers which were hardy enough to flourish there; just a sun-flecked patch of long grass in the summer, a riot of laburnums and hawthorn in the spring, brown and gold

in autumn rain, and utterly desolate when fog enwrapped it and winter winds howled in its leafless trees.

The houses in St. Mark's Square had balconies and high porticoes, area steps leading to dark basements, and little windows heavily leaded, as if every pane had taken, in its old age, to wearing spectacles. The coping stone below the sloping roofs was adorned with carvings of strange and fearsome beasts, lions, tigers, wild horses, interspersed with the heads of most natural and good-tempered dogs.

Mrs. Roseglade lived at Heron House, so named because it was the only one in the Square decorated with birds.

Isobel loved the look of Heron House, with its odd pots of plants on the window sills, green curtains, great brass knocker, red-paved entrance hall, panelled walls, confusion of colours, untidy, wide rooms, sense of comfort, ease and artistic possessions.

There was none of the sweet, fresh charm of Lulworth House, sunny and speckless, for it was a place to be seen by candlelight; an air of mystery about it; poor, not poverty-stricken; full of the records of old pleasures and half forgotten interests.

Aunt Althea was a fitting mistress for Heron House. Never moody, like her brother Henry Erne, her temper was happy and her manners demonstrative.

She was a tall woman, as handsome at forty-five as she had been at twenty; her hazel eyes were more soft than brilliant, her other features well shaped, but little noticed in the play of expression—a big, mobile mouth that curved and smiled in repose, a fine nose, a round chin as yet unspoilt by a threatened, beauty-destroying double, a head crowned with dark hair, touched with grey, a form as gracious as the Greek Demeter, a voice that was slightly hoarse, deeply melodious—this is but an impression of Althea Roseglade as Isobel knew her.

Blind love and admiration looked through Isobel's eyes. Cecilia saw their aunt with affection, too, tempered with the criticism that she never made the best of herself, being careless of others' opinion and indifferent to the gaze of man. Laura was so fond of Aunt Althea as to

forgive—almost—her eccentricity and lack of worldly prudence.

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Isobel knocked at the door of Heron House with the great brass knocker. It was the head of a dragon. "If you belonged to me," she thought, "I'd polish you."

One usually had to knock twice at the Roseglades' door. Intimate friends lifted the flap of the letter-box and whistled or shouted. The dragon could not be heard in the garden, where Mrs. Roseglade spent much of her time at all seasons of the year. She was there when Isobel called on this April day.

Fortunately the master of the house happened to be at home. Henry Erne's stipulation that his daughters were only to visit their aunt when Roseglade was absent—if he ever made it as Laura declared—had lapsed when the elder girls were married. Isobel had seen him several times, and he had dined, with aunt Althea, at the Reubens' house.

It was Mr. Roseglade who admitted Isobel to the red-paved hall.

A tall, big, urbane man, this Edward Roseglade, the fires of an adventurous, vivid life still burning in his memory, its fitful brightness changed to a steady, genial glow, ready to smoulder into the ashes of peaceful old age.

Isobel liked him, though he made her feel shy. He was so big and strong; a rock of a man, who looked upon her with an expression which she had never seen in her father's eyes, tender and protective.

"Your aunt is in the garden, Belle," said Mr. Roseglade; "Will you join her there, or come into the room?"

The Roseglades had had the partition between the front and back rooms on the ground floor removed, making the two into one that was called "the" room.

Isobel chose the garden.

Aunt Althea was digging, with a pair of huge gloves of Roseglade's on her hands, a coloured handkerchief tied over her hair, and the skirt of her dress turned up at the bottom and neatly pinned.

She was not alone. A young man, also prepared for hard work, was digging near by. While Althea was

deliberate in her efforts, her fellow gardener turned over the soil as if his life depended on his speed and thoroughness.

Isobel walked sedately down the path of little stones, looking at the early hyacinths in flower in the narrow bed against the fence. It was a long strip of a garden, with an overgrown syringa bush at one end.

Aunt Althea pulled off one of her gloves and, putting her hand round the girl's neck, stooped to kiss her on both cheeks. Then she introduced her companion.

"This is our 'sober 'and,' Belle. Mr. Hesketh—my niece, Miss Erne."

"I think I've met Miss Erne before," said the young man, looking at her with a certain bright intentness of expression that she seemed to remember; "It was at the wedding of your sister, Miss Erne, to Ben Reuben."

"That's delightful if you are old friends," said Mrs. Roseglade; "I call Joe Hesketh our 'sober 'and,' because the charwoman said all I wanted to make the garden a little Parrydise was a sober man to give me an 'and.'"

"Was I not considered sufficiently sober?" asked Mr. Roseglade.

"My dear Edward, Mrs. Cutting looks upon you with awe. She may have observed too, that you are not an energetic person."

"What are you making?" asked Isobel, staring at their efforts with the vague expression of a Londoner who owns a back yard.

"A vegetable garden, dearest. I want to grow my own green peas. I've always had an ambition to grow my own green peas. Up to date we've only had mint and marrows."

"Your flowers were so beautiful last summer, aunt Althea."

"Yes, but wait till you taste our peas, Belle."

Aunt Althea pulled off her other glove and wiped the perspiration from her face.

"Time to knock off, sober 'and,'" she said; "Let us go into the room and have tea."

Joe Hesketh took the spades into the tool shed, turned

down his shirt sleeves, and walked beside Isobel towards the house.

Aunt Althea drew her hand through Roseglade's arm, lingering to gaze at the hyacinths and talk about little promising plants beginning to show themselves.

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"Do you remember me now?" said Hesketh, his intent expression very marked as he looked at Isobel.

"Yes. I remembered you at once."

"It was a long time ago that we met," he went on; "Mr. and Mrs. Reuben have been married—five years?"

"More than five years."

"I haven't seen either of them since the wedding day. Your sister was a very handsome girl."

"She is more handsome than ever. My sister Laura is married too."

"I don't recollect her."

"No? You recollected me on the instant, and I have changed very much."

"In one way—yes. In another, not at all. I couldn't have described you half an hour ago, Miss Erne, but now my memory is wide awake. I should have said I had forgotten you before this afternoon. It would have been false."

Isobel had been looking down as she talked; at his last words she raised her wondering eyes to his face. His quick smile was reassuring, for he had spoken with more emphasis than he knew.

They looked at each other, not so much with curiosity, as with sudden, elemental keenness of vision—as the first youth must have looked at the first maid—and in one moment his life had changed for Hesketh.

Isobel Erne was wholly unconscious of his sensation, although she felt the thrill of the unknown wave that passed between them, too delicate and subtle for words—only to be faintly expressed in music, in thought, in silence.

Her beauty absorbed his heart and mind and senses. The thoughts of Isobel, even while her eyes were held by his ardent gaze, were swept to another scene in a distant place.

For her the wind was suddenly blowing over the lake at Lulwater, and Godfrey Strang stood upon the shore, half seen and half hidden in the mist of a summer morning.

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Hesketh was seven years older than the girl.

He was not a man of wide experience nor depth of character; boyish, impetuous; capable of passionate action, strong resolution; no angel among his fellows, but free from grossness; honest, truthful, hard on occasion; brave, and one who loved justice.

Isobel's impression of him, putting aside the attraction of his youth and manhood, was not altogether in his favour. She read him as aggressive, blunt, and with little of the gentleness that would have appealed to her in any man. Her lonely life, and unlovable home, made her long to weakness for sympathy and soft words.

It was not in Hesketh's nature to study women. He knew that life was a rough road and all he had ever thought of asking, or offering, was the hand of a comrade, the wife to do her part, and he to do his, with equal loyalty.

At heart a simple man, mating to him was a simple thing.

It was strange that the dark eyes of an unknown girl should so affect him! He had believed that any woman—given youth, health, and a presence to please—could make any man happy. . . . More and more strange that the dark eyes of an unknown girl should so affect him.

"Have you ever thought how everything we do and say belongs to memory?" said Isobel.

"Not the future—that is ours to possess," replied Hesketh.

"The future is of no use until it becomes the present. Directly after it becomes the present, it is the past and claimed by memory."

"That sounds like the speech of an old woman, not such a girl as you are."

"It strikes you as sad?" asked Isobel.

"Yes. I can't agree that the future is useless. I live for it. The past is dead."

"Your personal past, or 'the' past?" said Isobel, with a smile curving her lips.

"My past. I'm wholly personal in all my opinions. I take no interest in other men's lives," replied Hesketh, smiling, too.

"That's odd to me. I think other people's lives are so much more interesting than one's own."

They had reached the house and stood still, waiting for the Roseglades.

"Will you remember me to Mr. and Mrs. Reuben?" said Hesketh; "I ought to go and see them. Shall I meet you at their house if I do? Where do they live?"

Isobel told him the address. He wrote it on his cuff. She had not seen a man do that before.

"Is that how you make notes?"

"Yes, it's all right, if one doesn't forget to transcribe them before they're washed out."

"My aunt can tell you Cecilia's address if that happens."

"True! Shall I see you at the Reubens' house?"

"Perhaps. I don't live with them, you know."

"Can't remember for the minute where you do live, Miss Erne."

"I didn't know that I had told you," said Isobel simply; "Our house is in Fossingham Street, Bayswater."

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Joe Hesketh was very much at home in Heron House. He helped Mrs. Roseglade to get tea, while Mr. Roseglade kindled a fire in the room.

Isobel watched the big man with admiration. She made the fires at home every day with the skill and economy in wood of long experience, but Roseglade had a magic touch. His fire was alight, leaping and glowing, in a few minutes.

A tawny cat had been sleeping on the hearth. Mr. Roseglade rubbed its ears and the creature began to play with his fingers, its claws hidden, the pupils of its yellow eyes dilating.

"What a fierce looking tiger!" said Isobel.

"I love cats," said Roseglade.

"I don't! We've had dogs about the house at home all my life. Don't like cats," said Joe Hesketh, carrying in the tray.

Roseglade went on playing with his favourite, smiling when the hidden claws slipped out and caught his hand, but without hurting him.

"Edward can do what he likes with animals," said Mrs. Roseglade; "I've seen him catch a rat in his hand and it didn't bite him. Do you know that he can talk Hippic?"

"Never heard of it," said Hesketh.

"It's the language of horses, Joe. I believe he learned it in Arabia when he was a young man—didn't you, dear? The other day there was a runaway horse down this road. It dashed the cart against a lamp-post and behaved like a mad thing. Edward ran out of the house, caught the bridle and began to talk. That's all, just to talk. He didn't use any force. In less than two minutes the poor brute was standing quite still, listening to him."

Joe laughed and shook his head.

"Some men are born to manage horses," he said; "Have you had much to do with breaking them in?"

"I hate the expression, 'breaking them in,'" said Roseglade; "It should only be used by brutes who would dock a horse's tail, or torture his neck with a bearing-rein. That's an aside, Joe. Yes, I've had to do with winning the trust of horses all my life. That's over—worse luck!—now, if you'll cut the bread, Althea, I'll toast and Belle shall butter."

The bluntness with which he had answered Hesketh made Isobel rightly suspect that he disliked talking about himself. Her quick eyes saw aunt Althea touch his arm caressingly as she passed him on her way to the table. He glanced up at her and smiled.

"How much he loves her!" flashed through the girl's mind.

* * * * *

"Joe, you ought to meet Isobel's father," said Mrs. Roseglade; "He's a box maker."

"Miss Erne ought to meet *my* father," returned the young man; "He's a box maker, too."

"Ah! They resemble each other about as much, as far as their work is concerned, as a gold jewel casket and a wooden packing case."

She turned to Isobel.

"Mr. Hesketh senior is a wholesale manufacturer of plain and fancy boxes, dearest."

"Hesketh and Drake, Limited," murmured Joe.

"Our business is also limited—extraordinarily limited," said Isobel.

"The governor employs a lot of men," said Joe.

"My father employs one man—himself," said Isobel.

Joe looked hopelessly puzzled. Mr. Roseglade reached up to the mantelpiece and put one of Henry Erne's boxes into his hands. It was made of sandal-wood, with a bee quaintly carved upon the lid.

"We don't do anything in this style," said Joe Hesketh, promptly; then, looking at it closer—"This is a hand-made model, isn't it?"

"Discoverer!" exclaimed Roseglade.

"Very well finished," continued Joe, turning it about in his fingers; "How many of these could your father complete in a week, Miss Erne?"

"I don't know."

"It all depends on what machine he uses," said Joe.

"I should say upon his temper," observed aunt Althea, softly.

"I mean, all the parts would be turned out separately," Joe went on; "In our place we make little boxes of this size in cardboard. I can't say exactly how many gross per day."

"Without the bee," said Roseglade.

"Of course without the bee. After all, that's only decoration."

"Decoration is the charm of the box," said Isobel.

Joe looked at the bee again with sudden admiration.

"True! How cleverly it's carved! I must get a box exactly like this for myself."

"Impossible, Mr. Hesketh. My father never makes any box exactly like any other."

"I think that's a pity. There are enough people

in London to scatter thousands of the same pattern among them without over-lapping."

"Do you think an artist would be wise to paint, if he could, a dozen pictures just alike?" asked aunt Althea.

"Why not, Mrs. Roseglade? It doesn't spoil a musician's work to have it played in a dozen different places. Besides, pictures can be reproduced as often as one chooses."

"A copy is never the same as the original," cried Isobel.

"Not to a good critic, perhaps, but it can be done quite well enough to satisfy ordinary purchasers. Distribute! Distribute! Distribute! That's the word for to-day. Give everybody a chance to enjoy everything."

"I know of places in the world—in our own country—that I for one should be very sorry for everybody to have a chance of enjoying," said Roseglade.

"So do I," agreed Isobel, impulsively.

She thought of the promontory at Lulwater. It belonged to her and Godfrey Strang.

"I wasn't talking of places, but commodities," said Hesketh.

"Boxes, if you must be so exact, Joe. You object to Mr. Erne making every bit of his work individual," said aunt Althea.

"It's so unnecessary, Mrs. Roseglade. If he consented to work for a good firm—Hesketh and Drake for instance—they would probably make thousands of copies of one design. Work every novelty to death before you give it up, that's the thing to do now-a-days. I appeal to Miss Erne. Isn't it too bad that only one person can possess this pretty busy-bee box when it might belong, in replica, to hundreds?"

"Not in replica, my dear boy, but in machine-made copies," said Mr. Roseglade.

"There isn't such a big demand for mere boxes, is there?" asked Isobel.

"An endless demand! If you come to think of it we find boxes everywhere," answered Joe, warming to his subject; "Men buy their cigars in boxes, women keep their hats in boxes. Everybody uses boxes, from the day we drop our first coppers into a tin money-box

until our sorrowing friends put us into an elm box with silver-plated handles. Mark my words, a time will come when ordinary food will be sold in boxes, or packets, for the way it is exposed to the dirt and dust in the shops now is simply abominable."

"Good! I agree with you there, Joe," said aunt Althea.

"It is a comic little word—box—isn't it?" said Isobel.

"One of the oldest Saxon words," put in Roseglade.

"I suppose all boxes were originally made of box-wood," she continued.

"Wait a bit. I'll look it up," said Roseglade.

He searched for a few minutes on one of the bookshelves that lined the room.

"Here is what I want"—taking a square, vellum-bound volume and reading from where he stood—"Box. The leaves are pennated and ever green. . . . There are two sorts of it, dwarf and the taller. It doth increase of slips set in March, or about Bartholomew tide, and will prosper on cold, dry, barren, chalky hills.' Now, let's have a look at Johnson," he continued; "'a case made of wood, or other matter, to hold anything. It is distinguished from chest, as the less from the greater. It is supposed to have its name from the box-wood.' Sir, this is a better definition, 'The seats in the playhouse where the ladies are placed.'"

"Yes, I like the boxes in a theatre better than any others," said Mrs. Roseglade.

"If you're going to the dictionary for the word 'box,' I shall hold forth on the prize ring," said Joe.

"Do you know that 'boxen' is an obsolete adjective?" said Roseglade, returning to his chair; "I think it's Dryden who describes a damsel with cheeks of 'boxen hue.'"

"I couldn't admire a woman whose face, in any circumstances, reminded me of a wooden nutmeg," said Hesketh.

"Don't you recollect that Mr. Wemmick had a mouth like a letter-box?" put in aunt Althea; "He is described as lunching on pieces of a hard dry biscuit which he threw from time to time into his slit of a mouth, as if he was posting them?"

"Couldn't one write a volume about real letter-boxes?" said Hesketh.

"What an obvious subject to tackle, Joe," rejoined Roseglade.

"Any box is interesting when its contents are a secret," said Isobel.

" 'This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder box!'"

quoted Roseglade; "No doubt a jewel-box is in your mind, Belle, or a pomander, if one may include a perfumed ball in the list of a lady's boxes."

"Nobody wants to revive the bad habit of taking snuff," said aunt Althea; "At the same time, it was an excuse for carrying the most dainty snuff boxes. Modern men are content to keep their matches in plain silver or gold cases."

"What of the box-seat on a four-in-hand?" asked Hesketh; "Will somebody make a pretty speech about that?"

"Thanks for the hint, Joe!" exclaimed Roseglade laughing; "I'm afraid we've all been making 'pretty speeches.' Let me speak of one box more and I've done."

"One more all round," suggested aunt Althea; "We will begin with Belle."

"My favourite boxes are the three caskets in 'The Merchant of Venice,'" said Isobel.

"What did they contain?" asked Hesketh, so innocently that she believed he was ignorant of the play.

"The first was of gold," she answered; "One of Portia's suitors found that it contained a skull; the second was silver and held the portrait of an idiot. The third was made of lead and Bassanio found her picture in it."

"Thank you. I seem to remember," returned Hesketh; then lowering his voice he repeated the last words of the scroll in the leaden casket:—" 'Claim her with a loving kiss.'"

Isobel felt as if he had spoken to her alone, whisperingly, intimately, with assurance of her approval. She was a little angry with him for his feigned ignorance of "The Merchant," and did not answer.

"The most interesting box to me is the witness box in a law court," said Hesketh, turning his eyes from Isobel's face; "It's a test of character to stand in it undismayed. I've been in the jury box several times, but that's deadly dull."

He spoke carelessly, tired of the subject, thinking of Isobel.

"The box of my choice is in the story of a tragedy, the old ballad of 'The Mistletoe Bough,'" said aunt Althea; "I first heard it when I was a very little girl and it made me cry bitterly. Your father used to sing it, Belle. I can see the bride in the old oaken chest, in my mind's eye, as clearly as I can see you all sitting here. She holds the lid open with her left hand, touching her lips with the other. She hopes and believes the bridegroom will find her. She is a girl with golden hair and eyes as blue as a forget-me-not."

"I would have found that girl, if I had been her husband, or died in the search," muttered Joe.

"The one box I should like to have seen, above all others, belonged to Pandora," said Roseglade; adding, after a second's pause:—"Without hope, heart would break'."

* * * * *

Other guests came in the evening. They did not interest Isobel, who lingered late for the mere pleasure of being in the same house as aunt Althea. She talked little and spent an hour in the kitchen, engrossed in one of Strang's books.

One other visitor, as quiet as herself, had chosen to leave the room—a gloomy, middle-aged journalist, who happened to have lost his job that day and preferred smoking in solitude to society.

Isobel noticed Joe Hesketh's voice among the others, his frequent laughter, his good-natured, officious way of helping Mrs. Roseglade to carry in the supper.

They did not talk again, but when Isobel was ready to go she found the young man beside her in the hall, hat in hand, bidding good-night at the same time.

"May I walk home with you? I'm going in the direction of Bayswater," he said.

She hesitated a second.

"Thank you, but I think a friend is coming to meet me, Mr. Hesketh."

"Oh, I don't mind that in the least," said Joe.

She could not help laughing at his coolness. The friend was young George Starling, whom she was as certain of finding at the corner of Fossingham Street as the lamp-post which stood there.

It was a long walk, but Isobel did not wish to go by train or omnibus, nor did Hesketh suggest it.

She often tried to recall, in after days, the impression that he had given her when they were alone together for the first time, walking through the quiet streets on an April night. It had vanished from her memory.

They stopped once, she remembered, to look at a host of daffodils in a garden, yellow-wan in the moonlight, but what he said, and she answered, passed entirely out of her mind.

She liked him in an indefinite way, feeling a certain pleasure in the admiration and intent look upon his face as he turned towards her when she spoke. It was already familiar and made her feel that she knew him well.

George Starling was mounting guard. He showed neither surprise nor resentment at the approach of another escort. Hesketh shook hands with him cordially. George looked pleased. Joe concluded rightly that he was a harmless, foolish young fellow.

"I feel I shall want to buy a wooden box to-morrow," said Hesketh.

"You can buy a hundred, cost price, at your father's factory," replied Isobel.

"Ah! I want it to be hand-made."

"Well, the shop will be open. Good-night."

"Good-bye! So we leave Miss Erne here, do we, Mr. Starling?"

Young George looked surprised at the question.

"No, sir, of course I live in the basement," he said.

It was Hesketh's turn to look surprised.

"G. Starling, Watch-maker and Repairs neatly executed on the premises," murmured young George, quoting the paternal business cards.

"To be sure—I understand," said Hesketh, glancing at the name painted over Mr. Starling's part of the shop.

"You needn't wait, George. Good-night," said Isobel.

The obedient George, evidently accustomed to sudden dismissals, at once disappeared into the darkness of the passage, and his boots, as heavy as his heart, were heard descending the kitchen stairs. Hesketh laughed, bade her farewell again, and walked away. He glanced over his shoulder before turning the corner. There were no lights in the windows. It was a narrow, mean-looking house in a narrow, mean street.

Joe Hesketh usually moved, as he spoke and acted, quickly. As he made his way towards the West End, homeward bound, his step changed and he walked very slowly, looking down upon the ground, as a man does who is lost in thought.

CHAPTER VI

PASSING TIME

JOE HESKETH had lived a very happy life until he met his fate.

To see Isobel Erne, and love her at first sight, was literally his fate, for he was never again able to escape from her thrall. The word is used advisedly. Hesketh was not of the type to become the slave of any woman, especially when she did not return his love, but Isobel's influence over him was too powerful to be broken.

It was one of the inexplicable cases of a man, well-balanced, temperate in desires and conduct, being mastered and possessed by a passion alien to his whole character. To say that he yearned for her, and meant to marry her, is but to name the strongest, far from the whole, of the emotion she had quickened in his nature.

He saw she was beautiful, but it was not only beauty that she expressed to him. She was pure; she was brave and honest; single-hearted; but she was cold, aloof, dreamy, an idealist—Hesketh knew her better in a month than many of her friends of years. Still she eluded him.

At times he was tormented with cruel jealousy; at others, angry with himself and humiliated by her power to wound him; at others, enraptured by her unconscious, mysterious charm; at others, more her friend than her lover in his tenderness; at others, her tyrant and wild pursuer.

It was strange that Godfrey Strang—a man so different in every way from Joe Hesketh—had felt, as he did, an attraction in this girl which surpassed, even if it sprang from, her lovely outward being.

Strang knew it was of the soul and was happy in a

minute's worship. Hesketh believed it was of the body to discover, in the fulness of time, that it always slipped from his embrace and defied possession.

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Joe Hesketh did not haunt Fossingham Street.

He was quick enough to feel Isobel's indifference. She liked to see him now and again. For many weeks she knew no more of him than on the day of their first meeting, taking no interest in him or his box factory. Her father scorned all factories, and she agreed with him.

Mrs. Erne was the only person in the house who showed any interest in the affairs of Hesketh and Drake. She made Joe describe the business in detail, comparing his description with her husband's little shop. Joe tried to make her see that one man's handicraft was totally different from the out-put of a big firm.

"Of course I know that, Mr. Hesketh!" she exclaimed; "My complaint is that Mr. Erne has no ambition, or he would take up with machinery to-morrow."

It was vain for Joe to represent that it would be impossible for Mr. Erne to "take up with machinery" in his half of the Fossingham Street shop.

A new grievance was like wine to Mrs. Erne, and she treated her family to draughts of it every day. Her husband said nothing. He had lately asked Isobel to make up his bed in the parlour, where he also preferred to take his meals in solitude. She obeyed him, afterwards carrying her grief at this new arrangement to the unsympathetic ears of Laura.

"If he likes to turn into a hermit, why should you care?" asked Mrs. Welwyn.

"It is so lonely for him, Lol, sitting by himself all day."

"Not a bit of it, Belle. I'd much rather dine alone than have everything flavoured with mother's grumbling."

"It isn't very cheerful for me to carry a solitary tray for father into the back parlour, and another for mother up to her bedroom. I might as well be a wardress in a prison!" said Isobel, half crying.

"That's the horrid part of it, but cheer up, darling!" said Laura, more affectionately; "Directly Cissy and

I are through the wood we'll come and brisk them both up with the babies."

"Thank you, Lol," said Isobel, although she doubted whether any number of babies would brisk up her depressed father and discontented mother.

Both Cecilia and Laura were expecting the advent of a first child.

Cecilia, after so many years of married life, was astounded and angry. Laura was delighted. Mr. Reuben did not share his wife's feelings. He had always desired a son and heir. Arthur Welwyn, in these circumstances, as in all others, said and did everything that was right and proper in a young husband and father-to-be.

Even Isobel could do nothing to please and entertain Cecilia during this time.

The elder sister was melancholy almost to madness. For whole days she would sit in her own room, brooding over the fire. She lost all interest in herself, except as an object of pity. Partly dressed, with a quilted silk wrapper huddled round her and her mass of dark hair dishevelled, she looked like a woman who had lost hope and courage in the hour of peril.

Reuben spent much of his time away from home. He made no secret of his temporary revulsion from his wife. They seemed to hate each other, only avoiding an open rupture by keeping apart as much as possible.

Oddly enough, he was more generous with money while they lived as strangers under the same roof. Perhaps it was a salve to his conscience. Cecilia eagerly took all he gave her, although she had lost pleasure in spending. She asked Laura to make the necessary purchases for the coming child—"Just as if I expected twins!" said Laura—and refused even to discuss its name.

When Reuben suggested Norman, having purposely chosen a name as far removed from his own as Hampstead from Palestine, Cecilia agreed with indifference.

Laura showed her usual originality of sentiment by selecting Arthur and Dorothea, to be ready for a boy or a girl. She said it was a grand old custom to name a son after his father, and she had accidently found out

the meaning of Dorothea—a gift from God—wasn't it beautiful ?

* * * * *

A son and heir was born to the house of Reuben. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Welwyn's child was a daughter.

Cecilia showed a touch of her old spirit on the very day of her child's birth.

When the nurse brought him to the side of her bed, with the words :—"Here is your little Norman!" Cecilia looked at the tiny, dark face for a minute, then she summed him up in two words :—

"Ikey Mo!"

It was very true. Her baby looked like an old, old Jew shrunk to the size of an infant, with sufferance, the badge of all his tribe, written on his wrinkled forehead.

Reuben, seeing him for the first time several hours later, privately thought his little Norman was a poor specimen of humanity to account for all the trouble and discomfort he had caused in the house for so many months. At the same time, he was proud of having him. His first wife had had no child, and this fact enhanced the value of his second and her boy.

Reuben was moved to a passing feeling for Cecilia that was akin to tenderness. In her weakness and reaction from misery and fear, she was grateful and responsive. For a little while they were more in harmony than they had been since the first days of their marriage.

Cecilia enjoyed her slow recovery to health more than she knew.

She liked to watch the trained nurse tending the baby ; she read the letters of congratulation from the conciliated Reuben family over and over again ; she had never enjoyed spending her money so much as in having her room decked with hothouse flowers ; above everything, she knew that her husband could stay with her for only a short time, tip-toeing out of her presence, after half an hour's chat, as meekly as any other visitor.

Cecilia had always loved Isobel better than her father, mother and Laura put together. It was during her illness that this old protective love of childhood began to change and deepen.

She thought much of Isobel's unchanging life of devotion in Fossingham Street. It amazed her that the chance of freedom, offered by the coming of Joe Hesketh, was apparently no temptation to her little sister. Looking backward, she realized a certain strength of character and quiet resolution in Isobel that they had all ignored in the past.

It had been acknowledged that Cecilia had the spirit, Laura the sterling common sense of the family. Perhaps it was possible for spirit to be shown in quietude as much as in agitation, and sterling common sense might be only another name for bustling self-importance.

Isobel's fond remembrance of Lulwater had been attributed by Cecilia to girlish sentimentality. She began to believe that Godfrey Strang had appealed to a depth in the young girl's nature that others could not find.

Isobel often wondered, when they were sitting together in Cecilia's room, what was passing through her sister's mind. Cissy's eyes were inscrutable as she studied the face so like her own in its dark beauty, so unlike in its young repose.

"Why do you look at me so long and earnestly?" Isobel asked her more than once.

Cecilia would give no answer; only smiled a little and turned her eyes away.

Laura would have been greatly amused had it been suggested that Cissy—her senior by several years, married and a mother—was still developing and immature.

Mrs. Arthur Welwyn scorned the idea that life was an enigma to any person over twenty-five. If a woman—a married woman—did not understand all about it by that time, she must be a fool. She occasionally expressed the belief that Cissy and Ben would be quite happy now they had little Norman to draw them together. Cissy had never told her they were not quite happy, but she was quick enough to be sure of it.

Sisters, confidential or not, understand one another in a strange way all through life. As Laura herself observed—"It's no use trying to deceive your sisters, they know you too well."

Laura was almost as anxious as Cecilia for Isobel to

spend all her spare time in her society. She chafed at her own loss of authority in the house at Aberdeen Gardens, if only for a few weeks. Old Mrs. Welwyn made a good regent, but her daughter-in-law liked to be the domestic monarch *de facto* as well as *de jure*.

Arthur happened to be promoted to a much better position the week before the baby was born. Laura said it was a great mercy—most beneficent and thoughtful, whether on the part of Providence or the G.P.O. she did not specify. There was talk of moving into a bigger house.

The Welwyns had no objection to placing a longer distance between themselves and Fossingham Street. Mr. Erne had paid them but one solitary visit. Mrs. Erne was inclined to accept their hospitality a little too often.

Arthur, in a minute of rash generosity, had made a bargain with an aged man to take Mrs. Erne out in a bath-chair for three hours every day during the summer.

Bath-chairs, even in those days, were old fashioned, and this particular one might have evolved from a sedan-chair, having lost its poles, while its roof had dwindled into a hood, it was so heavy and cumbersome.

Instead of going to Kensington Gardens, as her son-in-law had intended she should, Mrs. Erne preferred to be pulled round to the Welwyns' road. This suited the aged man excellently. While the lady was taking the air in the house, he used the floor of the chair as a seat and went to sleep.

Laura was annoyed, but her mother ignored both her hints and open suggestions as to moving on. The bath-chair, being stationed on the pavement, against the area steps, it was responsible for the cook getting very heated before she began to cook. It got in the fishmonger's way, the butcher boy climbed over it, and she heard the vegetables and the milk swear at it 'orribly under their breath.

Hampstead being too far for the aged man, Mrs. Erne rarely visited her elder daughter. Cecilia as rarely appeared in Fossingham Street.

As Norman Ikey Mo changed from a little old Jew into an ordinary plump baby, his mother's interest and affection grew.

"I can't be bothered with looking after the child, but I'm beginning to adore him," she told Isobel.

So a good nurse was engaged to take the hourly bother, leaving Cecilia free for occasional adoration.

Laura, on the other hand, felt that a mother's influence could not be exerted too early. The infant Dorothea—Arthur and Laura agreed it was too beautiful a name to be shortened—was a good baby from her birth, meaning that she was healthy and placid.

The new tenderness Isobel had awakened in Cecilia did not change when her elder sister recovered her old strength and beauty. It was not shown so frequently, as in the days of her illness and depression, for Cissy no longer depended upon Isobel for companionship. She made new friends, having thrown aside the semi-Bohemian Chelsea set as carelessly as once admired dresses which no longer suited her. Her own Gertie Jacobs, hitherto a dear little pussy, was discovered to be an envious little cat.

Isobel took her sister to task for faithlessness.

"You'll never keep an old friend if you're not loyal, Cissy."

"I don't want to keep my old friends. I want to make new ones, Belle."

She laughed at Isobel's serious face.

"I don't judge my friends' value by the length of time I've had them, in the way Ben judges the wines in his business."

She laughed again and elaborated the idea.

"You're such a constant little person, Belle, that you only want to know people who resemble a high claret that will keep and improve, or a tawny port, matured in wood, with good body and flavour. Laura's circle is like champagne——"

"I shouldn't have thought it!" interrupted Isobel.

——"When it's extra dry," concluded Cecilia.

"What sort of wine does Arthur remind you of, Cissy?"

"Let me see. I should say it was pale sherry, with a nice mature flavour."

"And yourself?"

"Oh, I'm sparkling hock, and Laura is a pleasant, still Moselle."

"And Ben?"

"He's an old liqueur Cognac—a choice blend indeed!"

"What am I, Cissy?"

"You?" she stopped and put her cheek against Isobel's face for a minute; "You're a clear sheet of water with lilies floating on it."

* * * * *

Although Cecilia's beauty had lost its first lustre, after the birth of her child, she was even more attractive in the year that followed.

There was a marked change in her attitude towards her husband. She courted his friends, laughed at his vulgar stories, and catered to suit his tastes.

It was as if she had found it impossible to snatch the purse-strings, and decided, like many another woman, to make him generous by comforts and flattery.

Reuben was not ill-pleased. At soul a mean and cruel man, he was willing to buy his wife's pretence of love and enjoy the power it gave him over her. Furthermore, he was no loser by returning to the old habit of giving her money and presents, for clever speculation had greatly increased his income. Cecilia, being ignorant of his affairs, thought that her increased allowance meant a little sacrifice of his own pleasures. Costing him nothing, it was practically a repetition of his lavish gifts of the first wife's jewellery.

"No wonder Cissy looks so gay in these days, Ben gives her everything she wants," sighed Mrs. Erne.

"I knew dear little Norman would make it all sunshine in their home," said Laura.

At first Isobel agreed that their elder sister was full of gaiety, although little Norman was a very uncertain ray of sunshine. After a while it struck her that Cecilia was nervous, excited all the time, unlike herself. They did not meet so often, for invitations to the Reubens' house were neither pressing nor frequent. Cecilia welcomed her, whenever she went of her own accord, but Isobel was conscious of a slight barrier between them.

Only a love as sensitive and responsive as her own would have perceived the difference in Cecilia. She

was demonstrative and free in talk, but it was all of the affairs of other people. She had nothing to say of her own, beyond describing her clothes and discussing their cost.

She was always in high spirits. Isobel felt exhausted after spending several hours with her. The cheerful placidity of Laura, in comparison, was quite refreshing.

It was only in the light—or the darkness—of after events that her sister realized the tension of Cecilia's life at this time. A fire seemed to burn in the depths of her eyes, making them too bright, as if a fever raged in her blood. She grew thin and restless, unwilling to be at home for one day by herself. With all this, she was not unhappy, for now and again her face mirrored an inner thought of passionate delight.

Isobel furtively watched her at such minutes, wondering what it meant, and heard how her breath quickened to a little, gasping incoherent sound. She never saw a touch of this emotion when Reuben was with them. His presence, even his step upon the stairs or hand upon the door, steadied and recalled his wife to perfect self-control.

Reuben thought she had never looked so handsome before, and frequently told her so. She blushed and laughed. He little knew that assurance of her beauty from any lips would have given her equal pleasure. It added to her secret knowledge of its power, prized and cherished beyond everything else in the world.

* * * * *

Isobel had long abandoned all hope of Lulwater. It was fading into the past, with the visionary days of childhood.

Two years had come and gone since she heard from Godfrey Strang. He was living in the Pyrenees. His lake-side house was closed, his sister and her husband being in Paris.

With the advent of her lover, Joe Hesketh, there was an almost imperceptible loss to Isobel of the freshness of her thoughts and outlook. He filled her mind with his own interests—pleasures, money, work, dances, theatres.

He had asked her to marry him less than a week after they met in the Roseglades' garden. She had refused. Hesketh went away—for a month.

Then he wrote to her. They decided to remain friends, and he promised not to make love. She liked him well enough, and they talked much of friendship. Hesketh thought it was absurd between a man of his age and a girl. Isobel honestly believed that it was possible. . . .

So they played, happily together, the first act of the old comedy.

CHAPTER VII

A NIGHT AT THE REUBENS' HOUSE

THERE are times when even the sun seems to rise at the wrong hour. The world is amiss, or one's own little part of it, and a whole day is like a bad dream of the night.

It was so with Isobel Erne on a dark morning of the New Year.

The fire refused to burn, the taps were frozen, Mrs. Erne declared that she was going to die. Henry Erne made his own breakfast in the parlour behind the shop. Isobel heard him coughing and wheezing, but she dared not offer any sympathy. As Mr. Starling was alone in the basement, the girl eased her mind by making his strong tea and cooking his thin rasher.

George Starling, still constant, had left Fossingham Street to live with his married sister and her husband in Clerkenwell. Young George, to the satisfaction of his father, was earning big wages as a maker of the smallest works ever put into watches. That he and his fellows were in danger of ruining their eyesight did not affect Mr. Starling. As he had once been proud of his son behaving like a bit o' clockwork, so he was proud of the big wages at whatever cost they were earned.

In the morning, between the labour of putting away breakfast and getting dinner, Isobel was enlivened by a call from Laura, nurse and Dorothea.

The Welwyn family had not yet moved from Aberdeen Gardens into a larger house. Laura's nurse was a little girl in her early teens, engaged because she had had wide experience with children, being the eldest of eleven.

If ever a little girl lived in a state of bliss, it was the small person pushing Miss Dorothea Welwyn's perambulator. There had been too little of everything—

except family—in her own home, and she had been suddenly transplanted to a wonderful place where there was a superfluity of bread and jam, sugar and puddings. It was not surprising that now and again, when she believed she was unobserved, this experienced children's nurse had been seen to caper.

"Work! Work! Work! You're always working, Belle!" exclaimed Laura, following Isobel upstairs to their mother's room, after the perambulator had been manœuvred into the passage.

"The work has to be done, Lol."

"Why don't you get out of it? You're nothing but a little drudge," said Laura, angry with her sister because she was sorry for her—a very common inconsistency.

Isobel stopped on the landing for a minute, with her fingers on her mother's door handle.

"What would they do without me, Laura?"

"That's all very well, but nobody's indispensable, as Arthur said only yesterday when I asked him how they'd manage at the G.P.O. when he goes for his holiday. Things here would settle themselves somehow. Perhaps you think Cissy and I were wrong to leave home?"

"Of course I don't. If I went away, where am I to go and how am I to live?"

"Marry that Hesketh man."

"I don't care about him in the very least—that way."

"He has a good position, and he's a fine fellow," continued Laura, ignoring Isobel's unimportant little objection.

"Perhaps he won't ask me again."

"Oh, yes, he will," said Laura, who had always been a good judge of lovers; "There's only one way of getting rid of a really dogged man like Joe, and even that is rather uncertain and dangerous."

"What is it?"

"Marry somebody else."

Isobel smiled, shook her head, and they went into the room.

Mrs. Erne was sitting up in bed, reading the inevitable novel.

In the summer she did not get up and dress except on her bath-chair mornings; in the winter she rose in

time to scorch herself by the fire downstairs for a few hours before going to bed again. It was not surprising that she was rapidly gaining weight.

"Well, mother, you ought to be out for a brisk walk on a bracing day like this," said Laura, who refused to acknowledge her as an invalid.

"You know I hate brisk walks and bracing weather, Lol," said Mrs. Erne, plaintively; "You young people don't feel the cold as much as I do. Besides, you've got furs to put on. I haven't."

"That's the latest excuse, is it, mother?" said Laura; "Why don't you both come round to lunch with me? You never see anything of the baby. If I've asked Belle to pop in and see her in her bath once, I've asked her a hundred times."

"You know I have to put away breakfast, Laura. My only free time is in the afternoon."

"Well, come and see her have her tea," said Laura, who was ready to exhibit baby in original performances at all hours of the day; "Are you going to get up, mother? I'll wait downstairs."

Mrs. Erne meditated with a perplexed brow. She had to settle whether Laura's good lunch would compensate for the exertion of rising and walking to Aberdeen Gardens. She was very fond of the Welwyn meals, but detested a frosty morning out of doors. Isobel had promised soup, and a bit of yesterday's apple pudding had been saved for her special benefit. She glanced at the window and snuggled into her pillows.

"I'd love to come with you, Lol dear, but I'm really afraid to venture," she said.

"Oh, very well. I haven't much of a lunch to offer you, but if you'd stopped to dinner we're going to have stuffed roast veal," said Laura, a little maliciously.

She knew it was one of Mrs. Erne's favourite dishes, but did not give her an opportunity to change her mind.

When the sisters went downstairs again they found the little nurse and the baby playing together in the parlour behind the shop. Mr. Erne sat at his painting table. Laura began to give him advice as to curing his cough, regardless of Isobel's expressive glances of warning.

Laura was one of those daughters who never neglected the education of her parents.

Mr. Erne immediately became absorbed in his work, barely replying to her affectionate, officious questions. He was greatly relieved when Laura, the nurse, the baby and the perambulator were safely out of the house, welcome silence following their bustle and noise of departure. Then he threw down his paint brush and took up a morning paper. Old habit made Laura respect a brush, as a tool of his trade, but she never hesitated to interrupt a reader.

Many women put books and knitting in the same class. When you have once learned to knit and to read, they can be taken up at any odd minute when there is nothing better to do.

* * * * *

Isobel suddenly made up her mind, in the afternoon, to pay Cecilia a visit of surprise that evening. So, at about half past seven o'clock, she set out for Hampstead.

It was a cold starry night, with the heavens a steel grey.

Isobel was exhilarated by fresh air and felt in a happier mood than she had known for weeks. The old pleasure of seeing Cissy was ever new. She had thrust the knowledge of a change in her sister out of sight, determined to ignore it, longing for the sound of her voice and the dear welcome of her enfolding arms.

As Isobel drew near to the Reubens' house she saw that the front door was open. Cecilia's maid came out, and, before closing it behind her, recognized the approaching guest.

They exchanged a few words. The maid believed that Mrs. Reuben was in. She had been dismissed from attendance on her mistress in the afternoon and was going out for the evening. Mr. Reuben had not dined at home. The maid hurried away. Isobel went into the house and shut the door.

There was no sound in the hall. It was rather close and perfumed by a bowl of hothouse roses in the centre of a table. Isobel started to go upstairs.

The drawing room, on the first floor, was in darkness

but there was a gleam of light in a little adjoining room that Cecilia called her very own. As Isobel heard no voices, she supposed that her sister must be sitting there alone.

Stepping lightly and noiselessly across the soft carpet, she meant to make a sudden appearance through the heavy curtains hanging between the two rooms. As they were slightly open, she was careful not to approach in such a way as to be seen.

She peeped through the velvet hangings.

The shaded lamp was turned low. Two chairs were drawn closely together before a dying fire. The floor beside one of them was strewn with letters.

Standing in the middle of the little room she saw her sister Cecilia, facing her, with her hands locked together round the neck of a man, who held them with one of his own, the other pressing her to his heart. Her head was straining back, as if to avoid his kiss. She was deadly pale. Her face was like the death mask of a woman who had passed away in agony. They were both silent in that second's struggle and surrender. Isobel could see nothing of the man but that he was tall; his powerful shoulders drooped forward; he held her by force.

Then Cecilia—wildly, recklessly, with utter self-abandonment—yielded to his embrace, sprang away, lifted her hand and struck him on the mouth.

It was horrible—horrible—to Isobel. The whole scene, as swift, as violent as a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder, tore the veil of her innocence away. She knew that this man was Cecilia's lover. She felt the reality of a passion she could not understand.

Her heart seemed to beat so strongly that she could not breathe; the blood throbbed in her forehead; she heard a cry coming from her lips that she could not control—a gasp of amazement, fear, intolerable pain

Cecilia caught the sound. Isobel saw her face change, the rigid lines breaking and quivering into a look she had often worn of late, harassed and terribly afraid.

Isobel shrank into the shadow of the curtains. There were a few hot words exchanged by the two, then the man swept past the hidden girl; she heard his step on

the stairs, the sound of the hall door softly opened, closed, and he was gone.

Still shrinking against the wall, she suddenly found herself in Cecilia's clutch. Pulled into the light of the other room Isobel was like a helpless, panic-stricken child overwhelmed with the torrent of words—half whispered, incoherent, passionate—the older woman poured into her ears.

Instinctively she had guessed the secret that Cecilia told, but not that the unknown man had refused to take her away from the husband she loathed; refused to help her to escape from a bond she had broken; refused to be true to her before the world.

The fury of a woman scorned distorted her beautiful face, made her writhe like a creature in pain, and had found a vent in the blow she had struck after meeting his kiss.

Isobel tried in vain to free herself from the grasping arms. She was silent and trembling all over. The sister she knew and loved had changed into a fierce stranger, with eyes that were dark and dangerous, wild with thwarted desire, cruel with revenge.

"Cissy! Let me go! Oh, Cissy, let me go! You're killing me!" Isobel gasped, her hands upon Cecilia's shoulders, struggling to push her away.

"Hush! For God's sake, be quiet!" said Cecilia, suddenly straining forward to listen, the quick breath panting between her lips.

There was a tense pause of a few seconds.

"I can hear Ben!" she whispered; "He's just come into the house. The beast! He's always slinking in and out to spy on me, but I've made a fool of him for all these months. Belle! Belle!"

Isobel, released from her arms, had fallen back into one of the chairs by the fire; her eyes were closed and her cheeks bloodless.

Cecilia knelt down upon the floor, kissing her hands and lips, soothing her with murmuring sounds, until her eyelids quivered and slowly lifted.

"Belle! You mustn't betray me. Do you understand? My fate is in your hands!" she said, dragging Isobel upright, her mouth close to the girl's ear; "Promises

you'll never tell—whatever happens—he'd divorce me if he knew—he'd take the child away—and the other man doesn't care any longer—swear you'll never tell—Belle ! For my sake——”

She said no more. There was a heavy step upon the stairs and then in the adjoining room. Reuben, shielding his eyes for a minute from the light, stood between the heavy curtains looking at them.

Cecilia had sprung to her feet. Only a woman face to face with ruin, at the crisis of her life, could have so mastered her rebellious nerves and steadied her voice.

She met him with a smile of welcome and a fond name.

Of all the lies she had told, born of her sin, none had been so hard as this. She felt for a minute as if he must see the secret in her face ; in Isobel's weakness ; it was written in the scattered letters upon the floor ; the very air of the room was charged with the unseen presence of her lover.

The truth was thundering in her brain. She pressed her lips together to keep from shrieking it aloud.

Reuben saw, or heard, nothing unusual in the little room. He was not a sensitive man. The woman who had made him marry her—when she was a mere girl too !—was not the woman, he believed, to hazard the loss of her winnings. He trusted to her love of his money. He thought he knew her well.

* * * * *

Reuben came to the side of Isobel's chair, sat down on the arm, and rallied her gaily. He had been to a men's dinner and was in an exceptionally good temper.

Even while he was flattering Isobel, Reuben was comparing her with Cecilia, greatly to the latter's advantage. They were both too pale, but that was unusual with his wife. Cissy had kept her brilliant complexion. He often said it was one of her finest assets.

“What are all these letters ?” he said, finding his sister-in-law more than ordinarily unresponsive to his compliments.

Cecilia stooped to gather the fallen sheets together

She had not dared to touch them before, knowing he was lynx-eyed and intensely inquisitive.

Her secret lover had never written her name. So far she was safe, but certain words and phrases, she shuddered to remember, might give him a clue. His suspicion once aroused, no devil would be more keen to hunt her down.

She looked at her sister, one fleeting glance, but it was enough. Isobel laid her hand on Reuben's arm, as he too stooped down to pick up the letters.

"They belong to me. I don't want you to read them, Ben," she said, quietly.

He laughed and jerked his head up to examine her face. Here was a chance for a little amusement. He had always resented Isobel's unconscious manner of standing aloof. He thought she was a prude, and trust a prude till you find her out!

"I needn't pity you for a lack of colour any more!" he exclaimed; "What are you blushing about, my dear? I'm sure there can't be anything in her little correspondence—eh, Cissy?"

"Those letters belong to me!" Isobel interrupted, for he had again bent down with out-stretched fingers.

Cecilia made a quick movement, but she was too late. Her husband had seized upon a sheet scrawled over on both sides. He saw it was the handwriting of a man. Isobel would have risen from her chair, but he threw an arm round her shoulders, holding her still, while he held the letter with the other hand, out of her reach.

"Come now, you won't mind your old brother having a look at a few words, will you, Belle? I want to see how the lucky fellow expresses himself."

Isobel pulled herself away and rose to her feet. She looked at him steadily, holding out her hand. Cecilia, amazed at her quiet self-possession, could do nothing. She was not afraid. Isobel was as true as steel.

Reuben's eyes wavered. He laughed again. Isobel did not speak. For a full minute he tried to beat down her silent appeal and resistance. He saw she was in deadly earnest, but the temptation was too strong. Without a word he turned his head away and began to read the letter.

His face changed—became eager and absorbed. This

was no ordinary, pretty little love letter sent to an innocent girl ; no tender, boyish sentiment had penned these words of fiery passion.

A coarse-fibred man of the world, like Reuben, read between the lines of the first sentence, and grasped the meaning of the man who had written them to a woman who desperately loved and would understand him.

Isobel snatched the letter out of his hand. She had been scarlet before ; now she was white even to the lips. Reuben stared at her blankly. Then he smiled—smiled with an expression of questioning insolence—and sat down by the fire.

He was astounded, bewildered, incredulous. Isobel was such a sweet-looking, simple girl, he thought, that he would have been ready to take his oath her face did not belie her. It was impossible—impossible—but trust a prude——

Cecilia put the bundle of letters into her sister's hands. Isobel had not taken off her coat, but thrown it open as she came upstairs. She fastened the hooks deliberately, straightened her hat, and bent forward to kiss Cecilia. All her movements were firm and decisive.

" I think I must go home," she said " It is getting late and I am so tired."

Cecilia kissed her without a word. Then she put out her hand to Reuben.

" Good-night, Ben."

Again she met the insolent curiosity of his eyes. He pressed her shrinking fingers as she quickly drew back.

" We shall both respect your little confidence, Isobel, you may be sure. I look forward to meeting the happy fellow."

His smile, touch, emphasis on the last words, expressive glance towards his wife—the wholly changed manner of the man—was an unspoken insult.

Cecilia followed her sister downstairs. Isobel put her hand out behind her, holding the bundle of letters. Cecilia took it, and whispered :—

" I'll burn them to-night,"

" He may see you."

" No. I've hidden them in my dress, and I'll lock my bedroom door while I do it."

They reached the hall. There was not a sound to be heard, except the rumble of a passing waggon in the street.

The sisters stood still for a minute, staring at each other. Both their faces were tragic and looked old—the one passion-wrecked and hopeless; the other saddened beyond words with a knowledge of shame.

It passed through Cecilia's mind that Isobel would never again look at her in quite the old way. That night had killed the heart of a child.

Slowly, nervously, the older woman held out her hands. A deep red flush spread from her forehead to her throat.

"Don't—be very hard on me, Belle. I was unhappy from the first day he married me, and now—this other too——"

"I love you, Cissy! I love you. Oh, Cissy—Cissy——"

That was all Isobel could say, but her arms were clasped round Cecilia's neck; she pressed her fond lips to the burning cheek, and her tears bathed it, healing and cool as the blessed rain from heaven on a broken flower in the dust.

* * * * *

Cecilia crept up to her own room, when Isobel had gone away, and burned the letters, one by one.

Her mind was in blind confusion.

With the violent end of the long strain of the past months, she began to realise how it had exhausted her vitality. The discovery of her secret had seemed inevitable, in spite of her lover's caution and her own duplicity. Not once nor twice they had escaped—or so it appeared to her overwrought nerves—by a hair-breadth.

She thought of their first meeting, since her marriage, when they both happened to be alone. He was an old friend, the man whom she had once described to Isobel—a singer who had seen her in her father's shop when she was a girl.

She thought of the rapid growth of their hidden love, his reckless impulse, her own effort to resist and weakness to yield. Then the concentration of her whole being on the problem of the future; the words which had passed

between them on that very night—they were branded on her memory, never to be forgotten—when she found out that all was over. He had thrown back the offer of her sacrifice, for she would have given up her home, her good name, her child for his sake . . . all was over . . . she held the bitter, bitter cup of shame and humiliation at her lips

Down upon the ground, through the dark hours of the night of her despair—heedless of the passing of time, heedless of the impatient knocking of her husband at the door and his careless laugh as he went away—Cecilia lay immovable, like a dead woman in a grave.

Her hair was torn about her face. Her open eyes stared into blackness. Her hands were clenched upon her breast with cruel marks beneath them. The white ashes of the letters were scattered over the hearth.

* * * * *

Cecilia dragged herself to her feet, when the pale light of dawn outlined the windows and objects in the room looked like shadows, and pulled one of the blinds on one side.

A wan moon was hanging in the grey sky. It was very cold. A few flakes of snow drifted through the air.

The wretched woman, shuddering and leaning against the wall, watched the first flush of colour in the east slowly intensify as a new day broke.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ORDEAL

THE days which followed the revelation at the Reubens' house, in so far as they affected Isobel, were haunted by fears, confused, unanswered questions, the echo of words she could not forget, and the recurrence of mental pictures which were startlingly vivid.

Now one, now another, of the scenes flashed across her mind.

She saw Cecilia and the unknown man, love turning to hate, the kiss to the violence of a blow.

She saw Reuben standing between the curtains, meeting the false smile of his wife. She saw his face as he read the letter and the scarcely veiled insult in his full, liquid eyes.

She saw Cecilia's blood leap under her skin when they looked at each other in the hall alone.

The first time she met her sister, a week later, Isobel felt an unreasonable surprise that such an experience could leave her beauty so unchanged.

One day she was in the kitchen at work when the sound of Cecilia's voice, so familiar in her ears, made Isobel start, listen, and wonder. She was gaily talking to their father. Isobel heard her laugh.

Then she remembered—alas ! alas !—that Cissy had so laughed and talked, many and many a time, with her wicked secret untold.

Isobel slowly went upstairs. Cecilia was standing at the open door of the parlour, her face in shadow.

"Ah, here's Belle !" she exclaimed, and gave her a butterfly kiss on the cheek.

"I'm enraptured with father's latest box," Cecilia went on, talking quickly and nervously fingering her gloves and the tassels of her fur collar ; "Have you seen it,

Belle ? A captivating little ballet girl standing on the tip of one toe. Father says it would do for matches—happy thought ! Why not give it to Arthur Welwyn on his birthday next month ? It would serve two gratifying purposes, please him and shock Laura.”

She held the little wooden box at arm's length, with her head on one side, pretending to study it. Then she laughed and looked her sister in the eyes for the first time, a fleeting glance as if she was afraid.

“ Talking of dear old Lol, do you know that I really shocked her yesterday ? She brought Dorothea over to our place. Such a pet, but I wish Lol didn't put her into bonnets that remind one of Queen Victoria at the Jubilee. Norman stared at her so fixedly that I declared it was a case. He'd fallen in love with his fair cousin at first sight. Lol pulled down the corners of her mouth and said she didn't approve of that kind of talk before children. My dear, they're both under three ! ”

Cecilia put down the little box and began to pace about the room, stopping to touch and look at different objects as she went on talking.

“ Isn't Lol a caution with that little nurse-girl ? Our Nanna looked at the poor child with amused contempt. Lol asked her what she would like for a Christmas present, and suggested some aprons or a nice cap. Of course the little girl replied ‘ Yes'm,’ but she confessed to old Mrs. Welwyn afterwards, that what she really wanted was a battledore and shuttle-cock. Lol says it is ridiculous for a girl or boy over sixteen to play childish games, and later on she told me that Arthur had just bought himself a new tennis racket.”

“ You're in an anecdotal mood to-day, Cissy,” observed her father.

“ That's the last,” said Cecilia ; “ I can't stop any longer. I'll just go upstairs and see mother.”

She started to run upstairs, stopped, and looked over her shoulder.

“ I'm going to Paris, Belle, at the end of the week.”

“ Are you, Cissy ? I thought that Ben was going alone.”

“ Yes, but I told him I must go too. I feel ill and restless—anything for a change. He has so many friends that I shan't see much of him or get in his way.”

"Are you glad to go, Cissy?"

Cecilia dropped the mask. She leaned her back against the banisters, staring over Isobel's head into space.

"He told me what he read in that letter. He thinks it was written to you and asked whether—never mind, I mustn't tell you that. It doesn't matter what he thinks. . . Belle! If I don't go to Paris, will you come and stop with me? Do! Do! Do!"

"Cissy, I can't. You know I can't. Mother is more helpless and feeble all the while."

"Will you come every day? Promise me!"

Cecilia turned her miserable eyes on Isobel's face. Then the girl saw that she had altered in the short time since they parted on the day of revelation. Not only her features, but her whole body had shrunk and lost the appearance of fine health. She was like a woman who could not sleep, haunted all day by the dread of a haunted night.

Isobel took a step nearer and pressed her face against her sister's cold hand on the rail.

"I'll promise to come to you as often as I possibly can, Cissy. Wouldn't it be better for you to go to Paris? Perhaps when you're in new surroundings, among different people, you may be able——"

"To forget?" Cecilia interrupted.

"No. You may be able to think more calmly and begin to hope again."

"Don't talk to me like that!" exclaimed Cecilia; "I can't listen to strenuous advice. I want to have you near me because *you know* and you love me just the same. I can say what I like and look as I like, before you, Belle! My darling! Can you truly, truly care for me still and not shrink away?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Child! Do you know what I am? Have you thought what I have done? No, don't touch me now. Don't speak to me. I can't bear it. I tell you I can't bear it! I should break down. Let us go into mother's room."

With sudden firmness, even pride, she loosened Isobel's clinging hands, touched the girl's lips with her finger, frowning darkly in the intentness of her warning to

silence and self-control, and led the way to the top of the stairs.

* * * * *

Isobel had to listen all the evening to Mrs. Erne's mingled complaints and praises of Cecilia.

Of all a woman's jealousies there is none so petty and pitiable as that of a mother of her grown up daughters. Fortunately it is rare ; too often it is tragic.

Mrs. Erne accepted all her married daughters' presents in the way she accepted Isobel's devotion, as her right. Although she thanked them in words, she was incapable of gratitude in mind.

Unhappily—as Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Price discovered after their sister's marriage to Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park—"there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them." That was Mrs. Erne's life grievance in a single sentence. She considered that her beauty—much exaggerated, as the girlish beauty of middle-aged ladies is apt to be when it is seen in the perspective of the past—had merited the fortune of a Ben Reuben and the admiring affection of an Arthur Welwyn.

"How lucky Cecilia is!" sighed Mrs. Erne to Isobel ; "Your father never had the money to take me to Paris. All young people ought to travel abroad, there's nothing to see in their own country. Still I wonder you didn't go back to the lakes, Belle."

"You couldn't afford to let me go to Lulwater years ago, mother, and now Mr. Strang is living in France."

"Never mind. Perhaps Laura will take you to the seaside next summer. One place is just as good as another. I shall never go out of Fossingham Street any more."

"Won't you go to Kensington Gardens in your bath-chair in the fine weather?"

"I don't expect I shall live to see the fine weather again. I seem to get weaker every day. I've lost all my old energy—" Mrs. Erne had never had any energy to lose—"And I suffer from such lassitude and depression. Ah, well! I shan't be sorry when the time comes—if you're getting a little bit of cooked ham for my supper,

Belle, be sure to make the man cut it with some fat and as thin as a wafer," concluded the invalid.

* * * * *

Cecilia sent a note to Isobel on the following day. She was not going to Paris after all.

"Come to see me directly after Ben leaves home, as you promised," she wrote.

Isobel kept her word. For three weeks she managed to visit her sister every day, sometimes for only half an hour, sometimes late at night. It was the hardest ordeal of her young life.

Cecilia was self-absorbed, as all in great trouble are, and did not realize how she robbed Isobel of her vitality. They were both unconscious of it. A sense of power went out of the one at their meeting, a new strength was in the other at their parting. They called it sympathy.

Cecilia had always been a creature of happy moods, breeze and sunshine. The experience of the past few months had torn away her self-assurance, pride and vanity. She refused to speak of the man who had been her lover, although she still thought of him with passionate regret. She said her love had turned to hate and contempt, trying to persuade herself at the same time that he cared for her too much to wreck her life.

Isobel never knew how she would find the unhappy woman. In after years it was all a confusion in her memory of stormy scenes.

She had known her sister to throw herself upon the ground, beating it with her hands. She had seen her lying on her bed for hours, sobbing. She had heard her rave and curse. There had been times when Cecilia felt the intolerable shame of a liar discovered; at others the stabbing penitence of that woman, long ago, who was taken to be judged by One who was writing in the dust.

Cecilia's fervent love for her boy did little to help her. She had never been a woman to whom the mere helplessness of a small child was of much appeal. The fear of losing him, having passed, was forgotten in self-pity.

Her secret was safe. Reuben had never suspected

her. There was a cruel gratification, strangely interwoven with her misery and humiliation, in having deceived him and revenged herself for his mastery and ruling of her life.

At the same time, she meant to be true to him for the rest of her days. She knew that he trusted in her loyalty; in spite of his many faults, he did that; he believed in himself and all his possessions.

So her complex and contradictory emotions ebbed and flowed. Isobel's devotion was the only point to which she turned always, constant as the northern star, testing it by a hundred vagaries, proving it by violent demands—impatient, selfish, reckless—she never lost the sense of that steadfast, merciful love.

* * * * *

"Belle, where did you get those grave, endearing eyes?" Cecilia asked her one day; "You're not like father or mother—perhaps a little like father—for you seem to understand me as they never tried to do."

"Belle!"—on another day—"Why did we miss happiness at home? If I'd been happy I should never have married Ben Reuben. Be careful, or you will take a false step as I did, and you will suffer more."

"What makes you think so, Cissy?"

"Because you're so sensitive. You're like a sensitive plant—a mere touch and its delicate leaves are closed together."

One evening, when Cecilia had been more quiet than usual, she suddenly spoke of their father in a tone which was new to Isobel.

"If I had been found out, Belle, I think it would have broken father's heart. Mother would soon have consoled herself. He is so different. I'm sure a time will come when we shall be sorry for the way we've drifted away from father. I am sorry for it now."

"You don't know how I've tried to get on with him, Cissy," said her sister, despondently.

"I'm not blaming you, darling, for a minute. I was thinking of Laura and myself. He's an unhappy man. Do you remember how you and Lol used to make little

paper boxes in his room when you were small children ? He was fond of us all then."

She was silent a while, her face between her hands, thinking.

"If it had all come out, Belle, and you were dead, I should have gone to father. He seems hard, but he is wise. He would forgive me then, but I shouldn't dare to tell him unless I was all alone in the world. Only death will break down the barrier now—perhaps not even death——"

* * * * *

Cecilia had a woman's gift of hiding her true self in the disguise of frankness. Isobel was amazed to watch her acting her part as Mrs. Reuben, rich, happy, devoted to a generous husband.

Ten minutes after a fit of hysterical weeping, or an outburst of rage, Cecilia would meet a visitor with a smiling welcome. That she was looking pale, or tired, or ill—however the other lady chose to name the shock of her heavy eyes and drawn mouth—she passed off with a ready speech. Never better in her life, she declared, although a little weary at the end of a particularly gay season ; her husband was still in Paris ; she missed him awfully ; what had she been doing ? Oh, playing with the baby most of her time and laughing at his pretty little ways all day long !

No trained actress could have surpassed Cecilia. In another respect she also resembled the heroines of the stage. She did not neglect her appearance before the world. She might look haggard in face, but her clothes were as carefully chosen and worn as in her brightest hours.

Her maid had been sent for a holiday. The girl was transparently simple and incurious, but her mistress could not endure her close attention, noiseless tread, or the chance of meeting her eyes at a brooding minute in the glass.

Although Cecilia's fear of detection was gone, old habit made her still secretive. Even Isobel had no idea how, or when, or where she had met her vanished lover.

* * * * *

One night Isobel was stopped by Joe Hesketh. Going home, later than usual, she did not see him until he spoke to her.

"Belle! Where are you rushing in such a hurry?" he exclaimed, the intent expression of interest she knew so well flashing into his face.

"I have been with my sister Cecilia all the evening. I'm homeward bound."

"And what has your sister Cecilia been doing to make you exhausted?" he asked, falling into step beside her.

"I'm not in the least exhausted."

"Very well, darling. J.H. is wrong as usual. I've been dining with some relations for no other reason than because some of their boys dined with us last month. The hospitality of our family is strictly on the lines of justice—a chop for a chop."

"Don't come in the bus with me, Joe. It's out of your way."

"No, your way is my way—at least, it will be in the long run."

Isobel pretended not to have heard the end of his sentence. The two horse omnibus, soon to disappear forever from London, jolted and rattled through interminable streets to Bayswater Road. It was difficult to talk, especially as Hesketh had to stand for nearly the whole distance.

Isobel wondered, as she looked at the faces of the other passengers—anxious, cheerful, vacuous, unhealthy, kind—if all of them had felt the sadness and cruelty of life as it was revealed to her. Had any of them touched the depths of her poor Cissy? Had any of them known so fair a place as her own lost Lulwater?

She had not thought of Lulwater for weeks, perhaps months. It seemed as far from her troubled spirit as the calm, cold sky was far from the disorderly, sordid streets.

Now and again she looked up at her companion when he stooped his head to speak to her. Hesketh was not a big man, but sturdy and thick-set, apparently observant of his surroundings, rarely moved to pity or amusement, and indifferent to all strangers.

Isobel compared him with the three other men who were her occasional companions out of doors.

Ben Reuben would have resented the over-crowding of the omnibus, probably blamed the shabby conductor, and noticed all the disagreeable points of the people round him. Isobel had often observed how his fine eyes, familiar and bold in their most guarded minutes, challenged the eyes of every woman who was young and pretty. It was so carefully done, so much a habit, that only a quick and intuitive girl would have seen it.

Arthur Welwyn was a talkative and considerate companion, a little too much inclined to look upon ladies as if they were convalescents unable to take care of themselves. Laura, who had a gift for locality and enjoyed overcoming small difficulties, left everything to him when they were out together. Isobel had laughed about it when they were alone. She said it was treating a man like a child to humour him at every turn.

"A very good plan, too, when you're married," said Lol; "I'm sure a great many of them treat *us* as if we were children. It's aggravating at times, but that sort of man, to do him justice, tackles all the hard jobs."

Young George Starling, Isobel's self-appointed escort on so many occasions, was a sad failure, being at the stage of the love-lorn when all people are shadows, one girl the only reality. This does very well on a lonely country road, but in a London street it means—bumping. She had seen young George in a hundred undignified situations, pushed on one side by perambulators, nearly run over by bicycles, the object of drivers' taunts, the cause of urchins' mirth.

"When are you coming to see our box factory?" asked Hesketh, when they had escaped from the noise of the omnibus and were in Fossingham Street.

"How often have I told you I don't like factories, and I've seen enough boxes to last for the rest of my life," said Isobel, wearily.

"I wonder whether you'll ever care about my career, Belle?"

The question evidently did not interest her. He was silent for a while. Isobel was remorseful. They had

not met for some time ; she felt she had been discourteous, if not unkind.

" I'll be pleased to see over your business place any time you like to appoint, Joe, except Monday or Tuesday, when Cecilia expects me for the whole afternoon, and I'm going to see Laura on Thursday—oh, don't make it Saturday, for I'm always so busy then."

" It's very good of you to be so kind as to allow me to give up a whole day for your amusement, Miss Erne. I'm humbly grateful," replied Hesketh.

Isobel could not help laughing.

" Well, why do you invite me ? " she asked, bluntly, stopping at the door of her house ; " We never get on together. You told me so yourself the last time you were here. You said I'm too romantic, and sentimental, and serious, to suit you."

" I wish you didn't store up everything I say when I happen to be in a bad temper, and then use it in evidence against me, Belle. Are you going to ask me in for a few minutes ? "

Isobel had opened the door. She shrugged her shoulders, turned up the gas jet in the passage, and led the way upstairs to the sitting-room on the first floor. It was cheerless enough, with no fire in the grate, every chair in a set place against the wall, and the blinds drawn up to the top of the windows, showing the dreary night without.

Joe glanced round and softly whistled a few bars of " Home, sweet home." Isobel sat down in an easy chair, took off her hat and held it on her knee, leaning back with half closed eyes.

She was indifferent to the presence of Hesketh, neither expecting nor wanting his sympathy. He crossed the room and stood beside her, his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. His expression was more perplexed than troubled at her weariness and depression.

" What's the matter with you ? " he asked ; " What has Cecilia been doing that you have to go there every day and come home worn out ? Tell me, darling, Let me help you through the ordeal."

" My fatigue has nothing whatever to do with Cecilia——" began Isobel.

"I don't believe that," he interrupted, coolly.

"—And I am not your darling," she ended the sentence.

"Wish I could agree with you," said Hesketh; "It isn't that I want you to be, my darling, but I can't help myself."

For a moment she thought he was jesting, but the look he moodily bent on her face was grave and sincere.

"Strange that I'm never happy with you, Belle, though I'm always scheming and planning to be with you for life! You're so beautiful, though it isn't only your beauty I love. I see how good you are, and self-sacrificing, and devoted, but I should want you just the same if you were a wretch of a woman."

He had not moved, nor attempted to touch her, but Isobel rose to her feet quickly and went away from him. She leaned against the side of the window, looking down into the street, as if he had not spoken.

Hesketh was hurt. Being far from obtuse, he knew she meant to check the slightest advance to a lover's intimacy. He did not know that she was thinking of Cecilia and the unknown man who had been so false—doubly false.

"Ah! You needn't be afraid of me," said Hesketh, roughly; "I shan't make a scene, like a love-sick boy of twenty. Don't you care for me a little, Belle?"—his voice and manner changed and he drew close to her again—"I loved you from the first hour we met, you know that, and I shall love you to my grave."

"Why do you love me so much?"

"Belle!"—he laughed a little—"Why does a man love a woman? No, that doesn't answer your question. Because you seem to be the better part of myself. It's just as if I'd known you in another life; perhaps we were not happy then, absolutely happy, but I can't do without you. You're my heart, my breath, my strength. I'll marry no other."

He stopped for a minute, and paced up and down the room. Isobel felt, rather than understood, the curb that he put upon himself. She was agitated and grieved. Many and many a woman would have been swept away by the appeal of his nature to her own, elemental emotion flaming into personal love.

Isobel, at another time and in another mood, might

have so misjudged her own feelings. She thought of Cecilia's story. If the love of any man could so rend and spoil a woman's life, she was afraid of love. Her mind was warped; her heart wounded.

The determination and restrained force of Hesketh's character had never appealed to her. She knew him instinctively as a man opposed to her hopes and thoughts of life, incapable of understanding them; a good, blunt man who had never roamed with Fancy, dreamed a daydream, or believed that an ideal is the only reality.

Isobel parted from her lover unhappily.

She had an innate feeling that it was impossible to escape from him entirely; his love had had so much influence over her. He was a part of her life. She could imagine quarrelling, losing sight of him for a long time, even knowing him as a mere friend, but never living in the world without him.

He did not try to meet her again at night, although he knew she was going to the Reubens' house every evening.

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Cecilia heard from her husband that he was not returning, as he had planned, at the end of three weeks. He urged her to join him in Paris. She suddenly made up her mind to go.

"If it was not for parting from you, dear, I should be glad to leave these haunted rooms forever," she said to her sister; "I must induce Ben to take another house."

"Can you give him any reason for going away from this one, Cissy?"

"No, I shan't attempt it. He can think it caprice, or ambition, or whatever he pleases. I know he's rich enough to have a big place in the West End. I got that out of the gallant Dubosc."

"Ben's partner? Have they been making a fortune out of wine, Cissy?"

"Rather not! Ben has been speculating and everything he touches turns to gold, so Dubosc expresses it. No wonder he could afford to be so generous to me just after Norman was born. He actually gave me about two per cent. of what was my due! Never mind, he shall put

the rest into a new house and furniture. I'll get out of this hateful hole by the spring."

"Will you be as anxious to see me when you live in your house in the West End, Cissy?"

She expected Cecilia to answer with one of her dear, enveloping embraces. Instead, she laid her hands on Isobel's shoulders, looking steadily into the girl's dark eyes.

"I shall always want you and be grateful to you, Belle, but I mean to shut the door upon the past. I'll never speak of it when I come back. You must never speak of it. My hour of weakness has run out. I was mad for a little while. I meant to go to the devil. You saved me. Oh, my good angel——"

She dropped for one second on to her knees, and kissed Isobel's hands. Her voice, her gesture, the touch of her lips, were inexpressibly humble.

Before the younger sister had time to draw back, protesting, Cecilia had risen and turned to face a looking glass which reflected her whole figure. She stood erect, gazing at herself, with pride and admiration. Emotion had brought a glow to her pale face and her attitude restored, for the minute, the look of buoyancy and radiant health she had lost.

"From to-day I regret nothing! I repent nothing! It is over—wiped out," she said; "I have been a slave to my own passion. I am free!"

Cecilia kept her word.

Isobel never again saw her in the old mood of sorrow, or tenderness, or remorse. She locked her lips, hardened her heart, and pressed forward alone on the long, hard road that we call Life.

CHAPTER IX

THE COMEDY OF A WILL

‘No, I haven’t seen anything of aunt Althea for months,’ said Laura Welwyn, emphasizing every word; ‘What is more, I have no intention of seeing aunt Althea in the future.’

“‘It may be for years, it may be forever!’” quoted Mr. Erne, looking at his daughter, gloomily, over the saucer of tea he held cooling in his hand.

They were sitting in the parlour at Fossingham Street. Laura was not sharing her father’s meal. Mr. Erne preferred a sheet of clean newspaper to a table-cloth, and Mrs. Welwyn looked upon such a thing as a return to barbarism.

“I thought I’d speak to you about Isobel going to aunt Althea’s so often, father, before I ran upstairs to see mother,” continued Laura; “I know Belle was there to supper the day before the Roseglades went abroad—she said they had spinach and poached eggs—and if one can’t speak about that sort of thing to one’s own father I should consider it absurdly prudish.”

“Surely you could speak about spinach and poached eggs to anybody, even if it didn’t happen to be your own father, Lol.”

“Oh, father! You know what I mean!” exclaimed Laura, aggravated by his stupidity.

“I’ve got an inkling, my dear.”

“You ought to know the truth, father. You’re aunt Althea’s elder brother. I shall bring up baby to take care of Dolly, though he’s two years younger than she is, and know all about her affairs.”

Baby, newly arrived, was son and heir of the Welwyns. The name of Dorothea had long been shortened to Dolly.

“It all comes down to this—is aunt Althea married

or not ? ” Laura went on, going straight to the point without any useless prevarication, as she told her husband afterwards ; “ Mother says she isn’t, and so do all the relations. You know how ill Chertsey gran’ma is and it really ought to be settled at once.”

The Erne girls had called their paternal grandmother “ Chertsey gran’ma ” when they were children, to distinguish her from Mrs. Erne’s mother—“ London gran’ma ”—and the name clung to her still.

“ Why should your aunt Althea’s marriage problem be settled at once because your grandmother is very ill, Laura ? ”

“ Oh, father ! You know very well that if Chertsey gran’ma believes aunt Althea isn’t married she’ll make a will in our favour—at least, in your favour.”

“ I expect she made her will years ago,” observed Henry Erne, coolly.

“ Mother thinks it will be worded in such a way that nothing will go to Althea unless she’s legally married. Now, to speak the truth, we’re all sure that she isn’t. We could swear to that, if it came to it, in a court of law.”

Mr. Erne went on with his tea, cutting his bread and butter into small round pieces, as if he wanted to play draughts with them. Laura continued her soliloquy.

“ You may think it’s heartless to talk about poor Chertsey gran’ma’s will and property when she’s dying. Of course, I shouldn’t do it if she could overhear me. I’m not like Cissy, who doesn’t mind discussing death.

“ She actually said she would have Ben cremated if he died first. He laughed and didn’t seem to care, and Cissy asked him if he wouldn’t rather be burnt in this world than the next. I think it was in very bad taste. No married woman ought to be able to think of such a terrible thing as her husband’s cremation. Besides, Arthur says it’s much more expensive than an ordinary funeral. It would be a great advantage for you and mother to come into a little money. I don’t expect Chertsey gran’ma has mentioned Arthur and me in her will, though our little ones are her great-grandchildren, and not many people have the privilege of living long enough to see their great-grandchildren, or the pleasure of making them bequests.”

Laura's conversation was like the spinning of a top in that it could not continue for long without a fresh start, although the one, given a bromidic topic and the other a good twirl, kept going with commendable energy. Mr. Erne, having nothing to say, or showing that he was weary of the hum of the top, she went to seek her more interested mother.

Strengthened in their own opinion by agreement, Mrs. Erne and her daughter settled irrevocably that aunt Althea was not married to Edward Roseglade. Isobel was away from home, or they would have had to meet a strong opposition.

The news of Chertsey gran'ma's grievous state caused a gathering together of distant relations of Henry Erne. He went to see his mother twice a week, and his house in Fossingham Street became the head-quarters of the other members of the family.

Isobel grew thin and pale in struggling with haphazard meals, Laura goodnaturedly supplementing her scanty stores by tins of sardines, seed cakes and fruit.

As Cecilia looked upon all her distant relatives as hereditary enemies, she neither called upon, nor invited, any of them to her new house in the West End. Her affection for her grandmother took the form of grapes and flowers sent to Chertsey. Mrs. Reuben's wealth made her family connections even doubt the ripeness of her fruit.

Aunt Althea, having gone to the Swiss Tyrol with Roseglade, who had lately been seized with one of his less and less frequent fits of restlessness, she was not present to check gossip. This was felt, but not confessed, to be an advantage. None of the relatives had seen Roseglade, which did not prevent them from telling one another that he was a most objectional man.

If Isobel, who knew him, had agreed it would have shown her good sense; as she did not, it was easy to see that he had infatuated the silly child.

Great-uncle and great-aunt Thomas, and cousin Louie, were the most determined disbelievers in Althea; it might have been a question of religious principle, they were so very firm about it. The great-uncle—"What can one expect of a man who signs his letters 'T. Erne'?"

said Cecilia—was an elderly landlord, who owned house property on a small, pay-your-rent-or-out-you-go scale, managed it himself, and lived up to the ideal printed on a child's money-box, "Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves."

Cousin Louie was the echo—the facsimile in feminine form—of her father, as became the heiress of the little houses. Great-aunt Thomas, having married early in life into her husband's and daughter's family from a somewhat lower social sphere, was treated by both with the patronizing kindness due to a well-meaning person who bore their name. A poor, weak-spirited dame, great-aunt Thomas, who had worn the same little cap with faded lavender bows and the same tight black silk dress, or they looked the same, since Henry Erne was a boy.

Philip Erne, another cousin many times removed—"the farther removed the better," to quote Cecilia again—was a mentally vague, good looking man, who called himself an actor on the strength of playing small parts in touring theatrical companies. He was rarely out of work, for he looked like a gentleman, and, having been carefully taught every gesture and intonation by the stage manager, could repeat a performance unchanged for any number of nights.

"The Rev Bob," as Isobel and her sisters had nicknamed the Reverend Robert Erne, was a bachelor vicar from some far away village in Gloucestershire. A kindly, simple man, the Rev Bob, but inclined to support great-uncle Thomas and the others in their view of the Roseglades' wickedness.

Miss Sophie Erne was yet another of the kith and kin of Chertsey gran'ma. Self-banished to Upper Tooting, one of the far outposts of the British Empire, she only travelled to London for the spring sales, or on rare occasions to visit her relations.

Such was the party brought together, not like the good spirits in a fairy tale to bestow gifts at a christening, but in hope of receiving them after a funeral.

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Chertsey gran'ma had passed away. She was over eighty years old.

Isobel had never before looked upon the dead. She thought of death, owing to her reaction from the nervous strain of Cecilia's violence of unhappiness, with stoicism. Although Cecilia had often said that she longed to die, her sister knew that she clung to life with all the strength of her being.

Isobel saw her grandmother a day after death. She gazed and gazed at the still face. Old age was written in every line, as she had known it, but changed by an indescribable majesty and peace.

She realized, for the first time in her experience, that beauty is not the possession of youth and the years of promise only. It is the heritage of the old, their work accomplished, their purpose fulfilled.

* * * * *

Althea did not return to hear the reading of the will.

The other relations, near and distant, were all present. Even Mrs. Erne appeared, weak and heavy, supported to her chair by her youngest daughter and the sympathetic Reverend Robert.

Arthur and Laura Welwyn were there. Cecilia was represented by her husband. Cissy had preferred to attend a fashionable Private View. To enquiries after her health he said she was not looking at all well, which was literally true as she had gone to the picture gallery to be looked at, not to look.

Chertsey gran'ma's solicitor might have been one of the family he knew so much about it. Cousin Philip, the actor, made secret notes of his personal appearance on the back of a mourning card. He happened to have signed a contract to play an old lawyer in a melodrama on tour. "Nothing like 'making up' from life," thought cousin Philip, jotting down such original memoranda as "black tie—gold-rimmed eye-glasses—signet ring on little finger left hand—wrinkles—thin grey hair."

Great-uncle Thomas, great-aunt Thomas, cousin Louie and the pioneer of Upper Tooting sat on one side of the room whispering among themselves; the remainder of the company sat on the other.

Henry Erne was the least interested and attentive

listener. He pulled his chair to the window and stared out into Chertsey gran'ma's trim little garden, thinking of the time when she was a young woman, in a wild and bigger garden, playing with her two children, Althea and himself.

Mr. Lovett, the lawyer, thoroughly understood the attitude of the Erne family towards the lady whom he knew as Mrs. Roseglade. How had her story affected the old dame who had just died? That was the problem. They all chose to believe that Althea was not married, for every person in the room, with the exception of Henry Erne and Isobel, had confidentially told him so.

Laura Welwyn had summed up the situation in a sentence:—

"We say that should our grandmother have left her property to aunt Althea, believing she is the wife of Roseglade, the will cannot stand. Aunt Althea has never deigned to contradict the family scandal. It is only natural that her relatives should think the worst."

"Order! Order! Order!" said great-uncle Thomas, looking severely round the room, like the chairman at a public meeting.

"Excuse me, but I can't see that it is your business to call us to order, uncle Thomas. Nobody was talking except yourself and your daughter," protested the actor cousin.

"Order, please, Mr. Philip!" said the old gentleman.

"No doubt uncle Thomas, as the oldest member of the family—somebody will correct me if this is not the fact—has a right to control the younger branches," put in the Rev Bob, mildly; "For my own part I am perfectly willing to accept——"

"Order, please, Mr. Robert!" interrupted the impartial great-uncle Thomas.

"We're not a set of unruly school children," observed Laura in a low voice to her husband and Reuben

"Let's move the ejection of uncle Thomas!" whispered Reuben, with a grin.

"Silence, if you will be so good," said Mr. Lovett.

Everybody settled down to listen, with the exception of great-uncle Thomas, who had mislaid his spectacles and was fussily searching for them with the help of

great-aunt Thomas, who was as agitated as if he had mislaid his eyes. When they were found—the spectacles, not the eyes—he put them on and glared upon the company for keeping Mr. Lovett waiting.

The lawyer unfolded, flattened out, and solemnly read the will.

It was short, clearly expressed, emphatically to the point. Chertsey gran'ma bequeathed all she possessed in equal parts to her son Henry and her daughter Althea, if the said Althea was unmarried at the time of the testator's death. If the said Althea was a married woman, her share of the property and money was to be divided between the other relatives—here followed a list of names, including Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, the Reverend Robert, Miss Sophie, Cousin Philip, three grand-daughters, Cecilia Reuben, Laura Welwyn, Isobel Erne, and their mother.

A dead silence fell on the room after the reading of the last word.

Henry Erne, the only person who was sure of his legacy, still looked out of the window into the garden. Mr. Lovett glanced from one face to another, watching how quickly, or slowly, the revelation came.

Laura spoke first, after a hasty and agitated consultation with her husband.

“Are we to understand, Mr. Lovett, that if aunt Althea is legally a married woman she does not receive a single penny, for in that case it all comes to the rest of us?”

“Quite right, Mrs. Welwyn.”

“But if she is *not* a married woman, we get nothing, for then it all belongs to her?”

“Quite right again, Mrs. Welwyn.”

“Upon—my—word!” exclaimed Laura, the full significance of the will bursting in upon her; “I am astonished and horrified at Chertsey gran'ma!”

Great-uncle Thomas's mind appeared to have been shattered, but he gathered the pieces together, held up his hand to command attention, and spoke:—

“It strikes me very forcibly—wait a minute till I can collect my thoughts—it strikes me very forcibly we have been mistaken in Althea. Perhaps—I feel as if I ought

to have the courage to say it—perhaps she has been the victim of gossip. I'm sorry to use such a strong expression, but I must. Gossip!"

"Not malicious gossip, I'm sure," murmured the Rev Bob.

"I hope you'll all of you remember that *I* never joined in it!" cried Miss Sophie Erne, who rarely spoke but seemed unable to stop when she did; "It has not been my privilege to see much of the family of late years. Living as I do a somewhat secluded life, it is not likely that I should have heard any rumours going about London in regard to Althea Erne—or Mrs. Rosebush, if that's her name—though I must say I was surprised at Mrs. and Mr. Henry Erne conniving at the worst form of——"

"Oh, I say! Don't exaggerate——" began Arthur Welwyn.

"I appeal to my girls!" interrupted Mrs. Erne; "Haven't we always treated your aunt Althea kindly and visited at her house—at least, Isobel has—whenever she sent an invitation?"

"Speaking for myself, I didn't see why aunt Althea wasn't as much married as anybody else—great-aunt Thomas for instance," said the actor, turning to that mild little lady.

"How dare you drag in your great-aunt Thomas's name, sir?" said Mr. Thomas, in a tremendous heat; "You've never heard a breath of scandal about my wife. We hate scandal. *We* didn't start all this absurd nonsense about Mr. and Mrs. Roseglade. I've never met Mr. Roseglade. No doubt he's a very respectable man, not a play-actor, or a box-maker, or anything questionable of that sort."

"The respectability of Mr. Roseglade is not an important point," put in the lawyer, drily; "Mr. Henry Erne and myself, as executors, must ascertain whether Mrs. Roseglade has any intention of claiming half share of the property on the ground of being unmarried at the time of her mother's death. If she has no such intention, being the legal wife of Mr. Roseglade, our course is clear."

"I'm sure poor Althea is legally married," said Mr. Thomas, emphatically.

"So am I," added Mrs. Erne.

"Hear! Hear! Agreed!" said Cousin Philip.

"I've always hoped so," observed the Rev Bob.

"I don't know that I've ever really doubted it, whatever I may have thoughtlessly said to the contrary," put in Laura.

"I agree on behalf of Cecilia," said Ben Reuben.

Henry Erne suddenly rose from his seat by the window and strolled into the middle of the room. He stood beside the lawyer, who was an old friend, with his hands on his sides, ignoring his wife and girls, his moody eyes staring at each of his other dear relations in turn, as if he had never seen such curiosities before and certainly did not wish to see them again.

"Half an hour ago you people were certain that if my sister Althea had not been married she would get nothing from her mother," he said; "Now you have heard the will and find that if she *is* married she will get nothing. So you have veered round. Had it been the other way about—as you thought it would be—you would have had the pleasure of damning my sister's good name to the end of your miserable, crawling lives."

He paused a minute, took up the will and looked it over. His hearers were too surprised, some of them too enraged, to answer him.

"I never thought to be sorry at speaking the truth to my relations, but I am," Henry Erne went on; "I assure you that Althea will never claim her share. It is yours, but you'd better keep your ferret eyes on Mr. Lovett and me, or we may manage to cheat you out of it—" he laid his hand on the old lawyer's shoulder and they smiled at each other—"allow me to congratulate you, ladies and gentlemen, on your firm, disinterested vindication of Mrs. Roseglade's reputation. Good-day!"

With that he bowed, took up his hat, put it on and walked out of the room.

Isobel rose to her feet and quickly followed him.

CHAPTER X

ISOBEL, HER FATHER, AND AUNT ALTHEA

"I SHALL drop a friendly note to the Reverend Bob. He's better than the rest of 'em," said Henry Erne, as he was walking part of the way home, to his youngest daughter.

Laura was taking Mrs. Erne to Fossingham Street in a carriage the Welwyns had hired for the afternoon. Reuben had hurried off to fetch his wife from the picture gallery, where he had left her in the care of his elderly partner, the gallant Dubosc.

Great-uncle Thomas and his family had departed with the happy knowledge that they were several hundred pounds richer than when they arrived. That daring pioneer, Miss Sophie Erne, was already on the trail to her camp at Upper Tooting.

The church and stage had parted company, as they generally do, at the first cross roads.

Mr. Lovett had gone home to enjoy a cutlet, a glass of good sherry, and a quiet talk with Mrs. Lovett.

Chertsey gran'ma's house was in darkness, except for a glimmer in the window of the room where a faithful old retainer, who had been her "girl" for thirty years, sat with a small nephew of eight, summoned from the country to protect her from ghosts and burglars. When his aunt cried, the little boy was deplorably sad and sniffed; when she cheered up, he laughed and suggested "Happy Family"—not the Erne family, but a children's card game—so, with supper and conversation, they got through the dreary evening after the funeral.

It was a long time since Isobel had had a talk with her father. He spoke regretfully of his bicycle, having been induced by his wife not to use it on that day.

"I can't see your mother's point of view, Belle," he

said ; " Why should it be proper and Christian to go to a burial in a carriage with four wheels, and grossly flippant and irreligious on a bicycle with two ? "

At first, neither Mr. Erne nor his daughter found much to say ; when he began to talk about Chertsey gran'ma and aunt Althea they were both easier. She had rarely heard him speak of his youth, and heard, for the first time, why he had taken to making boxes.

" My grandfather farmed his own little bit of land in Kent, Belle, so did my father and I was supposed to follow in their footsteps. I was too lazy and too ambitious at the same time. I used to moon about the place, with a book in my hand, when I ought to have been working.

" We had a lot of chickens and I couldn't bear to wring their necks. It made me positively ill every time they killed a pig. Then in the spring, when they took the lambs away to be sold to the butcher, I used to be wretched because of the ewes bleating for them all day long. I would listen and listen, when I woke in the early morning, until it made the whole country sad."

" Did aunt Althea think of the animals in the same way, father ? "

" I don't remember. She was a wild thing ! Ran away from school twice, went off with a gipsy family one summer and hawked brooms and baskets for her living, until one of the fellows—some dare-devil of a Petulengro or Flaming Tinman—wanted to set up with her in a caravan of their own. Althea didn't see it, especially as he had a wife already. So she came home again, brown as a berry, her hair cropped short, looking like a handsome boy."

" I suppose Chertsey gran'ma and gran'pa were very angry ? "

" Of course, there was a royal row. I took her part. They might have forgiven that, but when it came to the parson's son telling them they were heartless and petty tyrants, it was more than your grandfather could stand."

" What had the parson's son to do with it, father ? "

" Why, it came out that he had helped Althea to escape from the gipsy fellow, after fighting him in true Borrow fashion. He was a great, hefty chap, our parson's son. I believe he wanted Althea to marry him, but his papa

and mama wouldn't hear of it. Althea agreed with them.

"She'd got into the habit of running away, I suppose, or she gave her second young man the slip, wisely choosing a brother, instead of a lover, that time to help her. So we came to London, she and I, to make our fortunes. The parson's son went into the army. That was the end of him, as far as Althea was concerned."

"You never returned to the farm, either of you?" asked Isobel.

"Never. Your grandfather died suddenly about five years afterwards, leaving everything to your grandmother. Althea and I had made it up with the old people, of course, and we advised her to live a little closer to town. She sold the homestead exceedingly well—your grandfather said she had the only business head in the family—and fixed on Chertsey. Why Chertsey? Because we once had a neighbour, down in Kent, who said it was the prettiest little country town near London."

"What did you do, and aunt Althea, when you first arrived?"

"I worked in a boot shop to begin, but I didn't like it at all. Most people have such ugly feet.

"My next job was to cater for the other end of humanity—heads. No, it wasn't a hat shop. I was employed by a dealer in second-hand books. Now, if I'd been a young man in a novel he'd have adopted me and I should have come to writing books myself, or some other bad end. As a matter of fact, the old boy said he couldn't afford to pay me wages to read the stock all day long.

"So I left the literary world and took up with an expert in antique furniture. It was there I met your mother. She sold the antique furniture in the front part of the premises, and I helped to put it together at the back.

"We made a special effort, as my master told the customers, to buy up old iron-bound chests and wooden boxes. He was very fortunate, after I'd been with him a year or so, to get hold of a great number of quaint, little old boxes at a sale in the country, made in odd shapes and sizes. Do you twig, Belle?"

"Were *you* the sale in the country, father?"

"Exactly. He was a wicked old liar. I often remember him when I think of my talented son-in-law, Ben Reuben. Why on earth did Cecilia—well, we're not talking about that.

"When I left my respected master it was to get married. We found a vacant house in Fossingham Street. I took it because the trees looked so very beautiful in that old garden opposite to us. By the way, do you know they're going to do away with it?"

"Oh, are they, father?"

"So Starling tells me. It's to be let for building. I don't know that my bride cared for Fossingham Street. She would have preferred me to start business in Piccadilly or Pall Mall.

"If you get married, Belle, be careful to choose a wealthy man. Your mother has been severely handicapped in life, as you have heard her mention, by her husband's lack of ambition and deplorable poverty."

Isobel gave him a nervous, sidelong glance. She knew so well the sarcasm in his voice and the expression he now wore of habitual melancholy and reserve. She slipped her hand through his arm, changing the subject.

"Tell me what aunt Althea did when you first brought her to London, father."

"It's too long a story, my dear, even if I knew it chapter by chapter. You must ask her yourself. She's not so frank as she used to be, but I shouldn't say that reticence is one of her faults even now."

Isobel was silent a minute, pondering a question she hardly dared to ask.

"Do you think aunt Althea is likely to approve of Chertsey gran'ma's will?"

Mr. Erne also pondered before replying.

"I can't tell you, Isobel. I'm sure she would have been pleased with my speech to the relations. Althea will never say a word to cast a shadow on Roseglade. I'm certain of that. I know your grandmother fully trusted him, although I believe she saw him only once or twice in her life."

"Trusted him, father? Do you mean she trusted him to take care of aunt Althea? Is he not her—husband?"

"My dear, I must again refer you to your aunt. She went to America a long time ago, met him there, and came home as Mrs. Roseglade. Althea was quite able to manage herself and her affairs when she was ten years old; she would hardly expect me to interfere now she is over forty."

Then he began to speak on a different subject, so abruptly and decidedly that Isobel dared not ask him any more questions.

They talked pleasantly, even affectionately, in the train and walking from the station to Fossingham Street. The shadow of No. 14, with a light gleaming in Mrs. Erne's bedroom, fell over Henry Erne like a heavy cloud—in less poetical, more appropriate words, a wet blanket. He refused his daughter's offer, as they went in, to get his supper.

"No, no, I'll make a cup of tea. I'd rather do it for myself. You go along to look after your mother, Belle. I can hear Laura's voice."

His immediate depression passed on to Isobel. She began to saunter upstairs, suddenly feeling tired and disappointed. It was a tame ending to a day of excitement.

"Belle!" her father called her back.

She turned and stood still. He moved a few steps towards her.

"You haven't said a word of our good fortune, my dear. We shall be a little better off in future, thanks to your grandmother's will."

"I'm very glad for your sake, father. You won't have to work so hard—I mean, you can take more time for cycling. It will be easier for you to get away from Fossingham Street and forget all about it."

She did not mean to be unkind. His expression, looking up at her, was not reproachful, but sad and unusually gentle.

"There will be a little money for you personally," her father added; "Your name is in the list of relations. I expect it will be a very small sum. You must do what you like, not give it away to other people."

Isobel did not go to her mother's room. She sought her own, shut the door, and stood still in the darkness, thinking of her legacy.

The money would be her own, her very own. The golden key to her Castle in Spain—*Magda Sed Apta*—end of the rainbow—the lake at Lulwater!

She opened a drawer, her seeking fingers at once finding their way to a hidden box, took out the ring which Godfrey Strang had given to her and held it, in the old way, in the palm of her hand.

"I shall go back at last!" she thought, in an ecstasy; "I shall go back after seven years! Seven long, long years——!"

* * * * *

Directly aunt Althea came home from abroad she besieged and captured Fossingham Street, not as an enemy, but by force of affection.

Isobel did not see the arrival, as she had gone to visit Cecilia. When she returned in the late afternoon aunt Althea was in possession. She had made tea for Mrs. Erne upstairs, Mr. Erne downstairs, Mr. Starling in his little half of the shop, and herself with all three.

As Isobel felt herself swept up and lost in her aunt's embrace, with a sensation of warmth and the touch of soft draperies, she thought of Cissy. They were very much alike, but with a moral difference between them as wide as the ocean. One was a happy woman in her age and faded beauty; the other was unhappy in her youth and graces.

Aunt Althea looked especially well, with the freshness of mountain, wind and sunshine still about her. She was in a talkative vein, described her adventures, laughed, rallied Henry Erne, and had even succeeded in making Mrs. Erne forget her ailments for a little while.

"I've heard from Lovett," said aunt Althea; "of course he didn't tell me anything interesting about the family gathering at dear mother's house. If it hadn't been for your letter, Henry, I should have known nothing of how well the relations contrived to mind other people's business."

"You've seen a copy of the will, Althea?" asked Mr. Erne.

"Yes, and I've talked to Lovett. Poor little gentleman! He's suffering from a bad attack of the Erne

family. Our great-uncle Thomas calls on him every other day, he's seen cousin Sophie three times, the Rev Bob has become a regular correspondent, and cousin Philip sends him tickets for the theatre. They're all in such a hurry to get their share of the money. I dare say you know more about it than I do."

"No. Lovett doesn't mention the relations to me, Althea. He knows better!" said Henry Erne, grimly; he paused a minute, looking keenly at his sister before adding: "I suppose we ought to quarrel now. I shall get my half share. You will get nothing."

Althea shook her head, sighed, and then smiled indulgently.

"Poor mother! You were her favourite, Henry. She knew I could look after myself, and yet——"

She stopped, leaned her elbows on the table and rested her cheek on her hands clasped together. For several minutes she sat immovable, as if alone, thinking deeply. Isobel did not make a sound. Both her father and aunt seemed for the time to forget her presence.

"Poor mother!" repeated Althea at last; "What was her object in making that will, Henry? What was the real object? She liked Edward Roseglade, and I told her all about him—well, a great deal about him. I don't believe anybody could have told her all. As he says himself, he's lived such a long time, and done so many queer things, that he can't help forgetting a few of the most important. At least, other people would think them most important. He's incorrigible!"

She laughed, and went on thinking her own thoughts.

"You don't intend to dispute the will, Althea?" asked her brother, after a while.

"My dear Henry, of course not. Your wife and the girls are quite welcome to their share, and so are the relations. It's gratifying to think of helping to provide for great-uncle Thomas when he gets to old age. I believe he's only seventy-six, and he's the sort of tough old gentleman who will not make poor great-aunt Thomas a widow till the nineties."

"What did Roseglade say to the will?" asked Mr. Erne.

"It seemed to amuse him, Henry. He has an eccentric sense of humour. As he truly remarked, it would be

very difficult for some married ladies we have met to prove they are married ; it would be even more difficult for me to prove I am not. I don't intend to try. So I've told Lovett he needn't worry . . All this talk, however, must be very dull for Isobel"—suddenly turning to the girl with a complete change of manner and subject—"Have you seen our sober 'and lately, Belle ? I mean Joe Hesketh."

"He comes here every few weeks."

"Ah ! Have you been over his works yet ?"

"No. I don't like them."

"Joe does his best to bring his father up to date," was aunt Althea's only reply to Isobel's tone of decided objection ; "I must get my sober 'and to come along to Heron House. Our garden has been sadly neglected during my absence. A new friend was helping me yesterday, but I saw at once he was not worth his wages—if I'd given him any—while Joe Hesketh is really thorough. Edward agrees with me that thoroughness is one of the greatest virtues. So, as regards a garden, he leaves it thoroughly alone. What are you going to do with your little legacy, my Belle ?"—with another abrupt turn to her niece ; "Going to buy yourself some pretty frocks or travel 'on the Continong, where yes is *oui* and no is *nong* ?'"

"Nong, aunt Althea. I want to go to the lakes in the summer. You know I was at Lulwater some years ago."

"To be sure. You stopped at Godfrey Strang's house, didn't you ? What a privilege ! We met him when we were in Geneva. He was on his way back to England."

"Did you ?" cried Isobel, with brightening eyes ; "How does he look ? Is he well ? Has he changed ?"

"He didn't look at all well. I hadn't seen the great man before. Edward was amazed at the change in him. He always stooped, as you will remember, now he walks with a stick and looks about eighty years old."

"Impossible !"

"That was my impression. Edward had a little talk with him. That sister of his—what's her name—a rather pretty woman, with a white face——"

"Mrs. Clare," said Isobel.

"She seems to take great care of him, a little more than as necessary, we thought, or he appreciated. Her husband is an entertaining man, when he can forget he's mother-in-law to a celebrity."

"Did you hear whether Mr. Strang was returning at once to Lulwater?"

"He told Edward they expected to stop in France for the end of this year, going home next spring—never mind, dearest, the time will soon pass."

Aunt Althea had caught Isobel's momentary expression of blank disappointment. She touched the girl with a caressing hand. Althea Roseglade had big, soft hands and firm; she should have been a doctor with such hands. Their touch was healing.

* * * * *

Aunt Althea was easily persuaded to stop to supper. Laura and her husband paid an unexpected visit to Fossingham Street that night. She had not seen her aunt for a long time. Arthur Welwyn had never met her.

The meeting was unembarrassed on both sides, aunt Althea being happily unconscious of the many discussions over her affairs in Henry Erne's family, and Laura possessing great coolness in what she called "social problems."

As Laura meant to be gracious, though not too cordial, to aunt Althea, she was secretly annoyed by Arthur's obvious pleasure in the meeting.

Although he was one of the most conservative of men, aunt Althea's unconventionality did not jar upon him. Laura had no idea that he could be so inconsistent, for he positively encouraged her amazing views, not only on politics but on household management, which his wife considered much more important, such as the absurdity of servants being obliged to wear caps, the over-use of starch in laundry work, and the substitution of a mop for a scrubbing brush.

Then they discussed foreign countries and, although Arthur's travels had not taken him farther than Paris and Antwerp, aunt Althea won him to describe exper-

iences of things and people that simply astounded his wife.

Even Henry Erne forgot to be gloomy that evening, and Mrs. Erne, hearing the unaccustomed sound of talk and laughter, thumped upon the floor to summon Isobel and warn her that so much noise would prevent her poor mother sleeping.

It was not until they were separating that aunt Althea spoke of her ostracism by her married nieces.

"I recollect Cecilia invited me to her wedding, and we've dined with the Reubens once. They never come to see us. You probably know why I was guilty of not appearing at your marriage, Laura."

"Oh, well, aunt Althea, I've never been inside *your* house since you came to live in London," retorted Laura, with a bold attempt to become the injured party.

"Now, Lol! Didn't I ask you again and again until I was positively ashamed of worrying you to invent excuses for refusal? Never mind! It has been a joy to see you to-night and a great pleasure to meet Arthur."

Laura flushed, then she threw her arms round Mrs. Roseglade's neck with unusual effusion. Laura had grown a little too matronly for so young a woman, but she looked as pretty as a girl as she clung to her aunt, so much taller and bigger in every way.

"I want to show you everything in our home!" she cried; "When will you come to spend the day, aunt Althea?"

"You're certain I shan't corrupt the babies, Lol?" asked the other, looking down at her and laughing.

"You'll adore them and they'll adore you, they're the most extraordinary children—no, I don't mean that. You know what I mean," said Laura.

"Shall I come to see them to-morrow, Lol?"

"Yes, do! Arthur, do you think you can possibly get home early? I should like you to talk over baby with aunt Althea. You can look at him together, you know, and compare notes. I believe he's far too intelligent for his age. He's rather fretty just now on account of his teeth, but he'll get over that when he's a little older. Sometimes I'm really afraid his skull is a trifle too big."

Laura sighed and then smiled, perhaps thinking that by would get over that also when he was a little older. Aunt Althea embraced her fondly, and they all parted the best of terms.

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From that day forward Mrs. Roseglade was re-instated the affections of her family.

Those who had been most opposed to acknowledging her union—great-uncle Thomas, Sophie of Upper Tooting and company—became her most ardent supporters, after the will had been proved and her share of Chertsey an'ma's money divided between them,

CHAPTER XI

SWIFT LOVE

It was six months after the reading of the will.

There were few changes in Fossingham Street. At first Mrs. Erne had thought of moving into a new house, engaging a trained nurse, and buying Isobel and herself as many fine clothes as Cecilia possessed.

She talked of her husband's "share of the estate," as if the small house at Chertsey had been a second Blenheim or Arundel Castle. Mr. Lovett, hitherto known as Chertsey Gran'ma's old lawyer, became "our family solicitor;" he was in high favour until he proved that Henry Erne's inheritance hardly reached a fourth of the sum she boasted to her friends—"Five thousand pounds, my dear, five thousand at the least!" Then she began to dislike Mr. Lovett, hinting in mixed metaphor that these sharks of the law know how to feather their own nests whatever happens to their clients.

Mrs. Erne admitted that the smallness of the fortune had its compensation in that the relations shared her disappointment.

Cecilia laughed when she received her little portion. Laura spent hers on the house. Isobel looked upon the cheque as a magic carpet to carry her, some happy day, to Lulwater. She laid the carpet, so to speak, on the floor of the Post Office Savings Bank, being assured by Laura that it would be quite safe although Arthur would be unable personally to keep his eye on it. The G.P.O. couldn't expect him to do everything, said Lol.

* * * * *

Isobel had met the new friend, at Heron House, whom aunt Althea had pressed into her service for garden work in place of Joe Hesketh, the original 'and.

History repeats itself with many differences, but love stories—at the beginning—with hardly any difference at all.

The man whom Isobel Erne found at work with aunt Thea, not digging the earth but pruning rose bushes, was the very antithesis of her old lover.

Hesketh had become "an old lover," refused many times apparently drifting away. She rarely saw him. He was making that effort which so often succeeds, when a man is young and eager for the best experiences of life, to find and be happy with some other woman whom he could love, if only half so well.

It was more the cruelty than the irony of fate that Isobel should meet with Franklin Osborne at the time, and in the mood, she did.

Osborne was a bold hunter of fair game; cunning without being brutal, not coarse, taking as much pleasure in the chase as in the capture. A hunter with imagination, old in experience, not in years; self-absorbed; capable of sincerity, but rarely sincere; kind and considerate to women in trifles liked by men.

Isobel was passing through a period of boredom; bored with herself, Fossingham Street and her own people. Cecilia, who could always distract and amuse her, was abroad. She came to the Roseglades as a last resource.

Franklin Osborne, when he was introduced, looked at her with great curiosity.

"A moody girl," he thought; "Too pale and thin to be pretty. A silent, difficult girl to know."

Then Edward Roseglade appeared upon the scene. On Isobel's quick smile of greeting, coupled with the affection in her eyes, Osborne caught a glimpse of hidden beauty. He had the good sense to appreciate her evident delight in the Roseglades' welcome. She was like a daughter, a cherished only child in their house.

Osborne was a rich man, nearer to the twenties than the forties, a dilettante, with the experience behind him of a professional singer.

* * * *

It did not dawn upon Isobel, meeting him and hearing

his name for the first time, that his life had touched her own in the past.

If she ever thought of Cecilia's unknown lover, it was with a feeling of repugnance and dismayed wonder. Such treachery as his was as alien to her nature as the passion of her sister. She had never judged Cecilia loving her too well, but the man had long been condemned in her mind as a traitor and a liar.

* * * * *

Franklin Osborne was a comparative stranger to the Roseglades. They neither liked nor disliked him, being simply indifferent, although they both loved his music.

He flattered Isobel by glance and word at every opportunity; she was the only girl in the room; he quickly reversed his first impression, finding her pretty enough, very pretty. He thought she looked unhappy; it was pleasing to his vanity to make her smile, blush, and forget her troubles whatever they were for a little time.

Aunt Althea talked of her day spent with Laura Osborne saw how the subject interested Isobel. He became courteously curious about Mrs. Welwyn, even professing to like to hear stories of such small children as the little Welwyns. Joe Hesketh had taken no interest in Isobel's sisters. Her love for Cissy and Lol had struck him—and he said so—as rather fantastic and exaggerated.

"Do you know, I'm always anxious to hear about my friends' sisters?" said Osborne, implying that Isobel was already a friend; "I've only one of my very own people left in the world, my sister Violet. Only one!"

"How many in the family were there to start?" asked aunt Althea.

"I suppose, my dear, the usual number that starts a family—two," put in Roseglade.

"My father and mother, Violet and myself," replied Franklin Osborne, whose repetition of 'Only one!' had suggested the death of half a dozen brothers and sisters.

"I have another sister besides Laura Welwyn," said Isobel; "She is called Cecilia. That is our prettiest name, isn't it?"

Osborne did not reply, although she had asked him the

question. It was evident he had nothing to say about Cecilia. Roseglade answered for him.

"It ought to be Franklin's favourite name, for Cecilia is the patron of music. I always like 'Laura,' because one of my first loves—another man's wife by the way—was a Laura, and she was a Mrs. Arthur, like your Lol."

"What's that? It's the first time I've heard of her!" cried Althea, smiling; "I thought I knew them all, but the list is endless. What was her surname, for pity's sake?"

"Pendennis, my dear, Mrs. Arthur Pendennis."

"If all your loves had been on paper, Ned——!" began aunt Althea.

"I wish they had been, with one exception," he interrupted, making her a bow; "Heroines on paper never grow old, though it's easy to put them on the shelf."

"Can't you find an Isobel to rival Laura Pendennis?" asked the girl.

"Let me think it over," said Roseglade; "Of course, Shakespeare's Isabella comes into one's mind first, the sister of that cowardly Claudio in 'Measure for Measure'. Then there's the 'fair Isobel, poor simple Isobel' of *As You Like It*, with her pot of basil."

"My name has been neglected by mere story tellers," said Isobel.

"Not altogether, Belle. We never forget Isopel Berners, making tea, when once we've met her in the dingle," continued Roseglade; "I don't think Dickens has anything to say to you, unless Bella Wilfer's name was really Isabella. I'm sorry to say Jane Austen called Mr. Woodhouse's silly daughter Isabella, giving the rains, wit and beauty to her younger sister Emma."

"At all events, you're better off than I am, Belle. Althea' has been neglected, although there is an Alethea' in poor Samuel Butler's amazing book, 'The Way of all Flesh.' She was a nice aunt, like me," said Mrs. Roseglade.

"Don't you grumble, love, I could find you in Homer and Ovid. You were a queen in olden days," said Roseglade.

"I think 'Isobel' is a beautiful name," said Osborne. "I'm sure I should like your sister, Miss Erne, but 'Laura' expresses nothing to me of the charm of a woman."

"Oh, Petrarch!" murmured Roseglade.

"As for 'Cecilia,'" Osborne went on; "It strikes me as a name for a—well, I don't care about it. 'Isobel' is perfect, colour and music in itself. The sweetest music the softest colour!"

Isobel had listened to many pretty speeches, although her old lover, Hesketh, would not, or could not, make them. Franklin Osborne, however, pleased her in a new way.

She felt excited by his flattery. His eyes were as bold and intimate as Ben Reuben's, but with the difference that he looked at her tenderly, kindly, with none of the insolence in his admiration that Ben had shown since the night of the burned letters.

Isobel, thinking of her first meeting with Joe Hesketh, hoped that Franklin Osborne would take her home. Joe had taken her home, although she failed to remember a word of their talk on the way.

She was disappointed. He did not leave Heron House at the same time, show any curiosity as to where she lived, or even express a desire to see her again.

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"I trust that Belle won't think too much of Franklin Osborne's soft glances and very obvious compliments," said aunt Althea, when both the guests were gone.

"You told me she was in love with Joe Hesketh, didn't you?" answered Roseglade.

"Oh, no! Laura said Joe wanted to marry her, but she wouldn't have him. Ned, I can't quite understand why all the men admire Belle. She's very loving, and good, and dainty, but at the same time—what do you think?"

"Can't say. Don't know," replied Roseglade, absently, as he searched for his tobacco-pouch in many pockets; having found it, he paid attention to Althea's question:—"If you asked me why Cecilia is attractive, I could tell you in a word of three letters. Isobel's different.

launting girl, with her sombre eyes and that lovely air, so still, but so alive, isn't she?"

He stretched himself at full length upon a lounge, holding the bowl of his pipe in one hand, the other under his head.

"You look like Du Maurier's 'Peter Ibbetson,' grown haggard," observed Althea; "Don't go to sleep, my love, or you'll lie there all night."

"I'm not at all sleepy, Althea. I'm thinking of Belle. I expect she'll marry old Joe some day, probably when his love has lost its freshness. That's the way with women. No happy medium! They either jump down a man's throat directly he opens his lips to ask them, or refuse to have him for years and years."

"What nonsense, Ned."

"I know the only man who would have made our dreamy Belle as happy as she deserves to be," Roseglade went on, after a pause.

"Who is it?"

"Unfortunately he's a great deal too old and much too famous."

"Who is it, Edward?"

"Godfrey Strang."

Mrs. Roseglade burst out laughing at the idea. It would never have occurred to her. Then she became serious, looking thoughtfully at her husband, who was quite unaffected by her laughter.

"I can't help wondering whether it was wise to let her go to Lulwater, Ned. After all, she was very young to be brought under the influence of such a personality as Strang. Don't misunderstand me. I know she was intensely happy. At the same time, it developed the child too early. To use an old simile, it isn't right to open the petals of a flower, however gently you do it. The flower suffers, although it may look as beautiful."

"Can't agree with you, dear. I know Strang. I think you do him a subtle injustice."

"Not at all, Edward, but I doubt whether any man of his age can realize the simplicity of nature in a very young girl of Isobel's type."

"Age has nothing to do with it, Althea."

"I should say, everything."

"You may be right, but I think not," said Roseglade.

"Then you believe, Edward, that if Isobel had been an older woman, or better still if Strang had been a younger man, they would have been perfectly happy together?"

"My dear! Is anyone in this world 'perfectly happy' for more than five minutes at a time, and lucky if they get that five minutes? But yes, I think he would have found in Isobel the partner of his life. He spoke of her to me as one apart, more lovely and lovable than the rest of womankind."

"I'm still uncertain whether it was for her good to be sent to Lulwater, Edward."

"Why not? Even if she thinks too much about it now, a time may come when it will prove to be the fairest memory of all her days, untouched by regret or disillusion. Few of us possess such memories to cherish, more's the pity."

He was silent for some time, lying so still that Althea thought he was falling asleep. She took a book from one of the shelves and began to read.

"I hope Belle isn't going to fall in love with this long-legged Franklin Osborne!" said Roseglade, so sharply that Althea started and looked at him in surprise.

"Do you object to Osborne coming here?" she asked.

"Oh, Lord, no! I like to hear him sing. I don't say he's a 'cold he-arted villy-ern,'" as I heard the heroine of a melodrama describe a wicked baronet."

"I think he's conceited, but harmless," said Mrs. Roseglade.

"Again you may be right. As Belle will have nothing to do with young Hesketh, perhaps she may find this man more amusing. He's certainly not so heavy-handed as Joe . . . why do you women like scamps, Althea?"

"Because we don't think they are scamps," said Mrs. Roseglade; "I ought to be able to give you a better reason, for I've liked so many myself."

"True! From your first love, who was a gipsy, to your last, who passes as a respectable householder and elderly sage," said Roseglade, with a laugh.

It is very self-revealing when a man of Franklin Osborne's weak, inconstant, but obstinate character seriously falls in love.

At first he thought of Isobel Erne as a girl too quiet and unsophisticated to hold his interest. Still it was worth while to see her again—this after deliberation, for his first impulse had been to avoid a second meeting—although he had no intention or wish to make her care for him.

The difficulty of continuing the friendship made him anxious to succeed. The probability of again meeting her at Heron House was too slight, for he was not at all intimate with the Roseglades. They were cordial in their greeting when he called, but he dreaded the keen observation of Althea. Again, he shrank from going to Fossingham Street.

He thought of writing to her, but ignorance of her home life checked his pen. A girl who was so fond of her sisters might be simple enough to show his letter to her parents. Of course the first little formal note would not matter, but it was a bad precedent. Osborne loved secrecy.

He had had an unhappy childhood, being the little bone of contention between a foolish, passionate mother and a stern, relentless father. The former had indulged his laziness and taught him to lie for self-protection. The latter had made him detest the prison called Home, and hide, rather than control, his innate desire for pleasure at any cost.

As a little boy he had stolen pennies to buy sweets; as a youth he bullied and coaxed his mother into giving him nearly all her personal money, and played the hypocrite with his proud father, who generously rewarded him for supposed virtues. He often said to his sister, when she found him out, it was the easiest way to make everybody happy.

After success as an amateur singer, the death of his parents compelled Osborne to earn his living for a time with his voice. He had expected to be rich, forgetting that he himself had spent the money, during their lifetime, which his father and mother had intended for his inheritance. After a few years of struggling in the most

precarious of all professions, made tolerable by gifts from his sister and loans from her husband, fortune again smiled upon Franklin.

A distant relative left him enough money to live upon and play with for the rest of his life. Osborne had always believed that something of the kind would happen. He had too much respect for Providence to think that it could leave such a good fellow for long in the lurch.

Franklin knew he was a good fellow at heart. If his life had sometimes appeared to contradict it—well, that was on the surface, the fault and the folly of others.

He lived in a flat at Chelsea, overlooking the river. A perfect working housekeeper devoted her existence to making him comfortable, an excellent husband having died and left her—Providence again—in search of such a situation at the period when Osborne came into his little fortune.

At times he thought of marriage with some pretty woman or another, possessing enough to keep her own purse filled. Unfortunately his inclinations were stronger than his prudence, for his different loves generally fulfilled the first requirements, never the second. They were pretty, but they had no money.

He soon discovered that Isobel Erne was not an exception to the rule. It was surprising to hear that her father kept a small shop.

His experience of shop girls had not prepared Franklin for her unconscious air of equality. His first little friend from behind the counter—Mam'selle Marie, Maison Jaqueline, Mayfair—he had found to be very highly connected (in France) and too anxious to appropriate the flat in Chelsea; and his last—Miss Winnie, Smith and Smith, Florists, back street in Battersea—had called him "Sir" and written to him as "Franky boy."

* * * * *

As Isobel had adored Lulwater the first day she looked upon the lake and mountains; as she had promised in a moment to be loyal to Cecilia on the night of revelation; as she had known at once that Joe Hesketh was not the man to make her happy—so she fell in love with

Franklin Osborne, without thought, without reason, without regret.

She had met him at a time of dark depression. He startled and excited her, three days after the evening at Heron House, by his sudden appearance as she turned out of Fossingham Street one morning into the main road.

Joe Hesketh had always gone into the shop, often talking with Mr. Erne for half an hour before she knew he was there. George Starling had waylaid her out of doors, and she had rejoiced when he went to Clerkenwell, but this tall stranger was very different from them both.

"You are surprised to see me?" asked Osborne, looking down at her as if she was a very little girl.

"Yes."

"No wonder! Didn't you expect me to turn up long before this?"

"Oh, no! It is only three days since I saw you, Mr. Osborne."

"Three days!" he repeated; "It seems an age to me. Years! If I hadn't been thinking about you ever since I should have been here before. I've been trying to keep away."

Isobel wondered what he meant. Why should he try to keep away? He answered the unspoken question.

"Because I couldn't meet you as an ordinary acquaintance. I wouldn't make some lame excuse to go into your father's shop and angle for an invitation to your home. I wanted to talk to you alone. You puzzled me at Heron House. Your silence is more expressive than others' speech"—and so on and so on.

Osborne was enraptured with the girl in the sunshine.

He had under-valued her clear complexion and freshness of youth. She was graceful, too, and unembarrassed by his intimacy of manner and speech. She walked beside him with an ease of companionship which satisfied his good taste. Only a change of colour and one slow smile confessed her pleasure at the meeting.

A self-possessed, proud girl, he thought, obviously flattered by his remembrance, but no fool. What did she think, or imagine, about men? He must find out.

At the end of a long walk Osborne knew as little of Isobel as he had done when they shook hands at the

beginning. Many girls confided in him at once. He was eager for confidences, in spite of their similarity, for women absorbed his mind in an unusual way for a man of experience and past the ignorant, sentimental age.

So, while he began to dote upon the outward seeming of this stranger, it was not only Isobel's youth and sex that allured him. He longed to know her better, understand her character, win her confidence.

She had already, without intention, awakened the better side of his nature. For the minute he cared for her unselfishly, and there was a certain charm to such a man in the novelty of his own feelings.

CHAPTER XII

BEGINNING WITH A LETTER FROM LULWATER. ENDING
WITH AN ELOPEMENT

ISOBEL was writing to Godfrey Strang.

She sat alone in her room, shared in old days by Cissy and Laura, long changed, characteristic of her life, different from all else in No. 14 Fossingham Street.

She had painted it herself, subdued in colour, olive green ; Joe Hesketh had not only been her paper-hanger, but brought the book of patterns for her choice. He had said that he could get any of the papers cheap from a man he knew in the trade. Isobel had innocently picked out the most expensive, thinking its simplicity meant a low price. Joe grinned and told her she was right. It amused him to deceive her in trifles, because he had had to submit to more than one lecture on truthfulness.

The thick grey paper looked sombre enough. She had three pictures, a sketch of Lulwater by an artist friend of Strang's, who happened to be there at the same time as herself ; an autotype of Botticelli's "Nativity," in the National Gallery ; and a pastel of Cecilia, in a white dress with poppies in her hands, standing against a background of sparkling summer sea. It had been painted in Cornwall, by the best man of the old Newlyn Gang, and given to Isobel because Ben Reuben chose to be jealous of the young painter and threatened, Cissy told her, to smash the glass and smudge out its brilliance with his coarse thumbs.

There was one shelf of books in the grey room ; a slip of a white bed ; a huge old oak wardrobe, left behind by some early settlers in Fossingham Street ; a small, cheap writing desk ; two wooden chairs, rescued from the kitchen for the sake of their good shape ; ancient, faded oil cloth on the floor ; something of a cell for such

a pretty girl to spend half her life in—jejune, severe—but restful and dreamy, in spite of Cecilia laughing from the wall, and the ever busy sounds from the street below.

Isobel did not write her letter to Strang freely or quickly. She had not sent to, or heard from, him for a long time. There was the story of her legacy to be briefly told; scenes and words recalled to his memory. She told him how their last row upon the lake, in the early morning, was mirrored in her mind as clearly as a picture she could look at every day.

At first she felt the difficulty of writing in quite the old way, for the passing years had changed her outlook. She thought of herself at sixteen almost as if she had become a middle-aged woman.

Her experience of love and lovers, aloof as she stood from them all; her knowledge of Cecilia's inner life and secret; the weariness of working for her mother whom she did not love; the oppression of her father's temperament—all that she had done and left undone, reproached her with the remembrance of the girl she had been. Strang would understand. Strang would give her back the light heart, and vague, beautiful ideals of childhood.

At the end of her letter she asked him, in a few simple lines, to send for her once more.

Her letter posted, Isobel was seized with restless impatience that she could not control. The quietude of the house became intolerable. She was absurdly startled at trifles. Her father's continual coughing jarred upon her nerves. Her mother's dragging voice had never seemed so wearisome.

Joe Hesketh, after an absence of months, happened to call in the evening of the same day. She manœuvred not to be alone with him. He was full of a scheme for enlarging the business of Hesketh and Drake's box factory.

An outsider would have taken him for an ordinary friend, caring little more for Isobel than her father. She might have thought so herself had it not been for the look in his eyes, at their meeting and parting, and the pulsing grip of his hand.

The re-assurance of his love always troubled her, although, with the inconsistency of a woman, she looked and waited for the signs of it whenever they met.

Strang replied to Isobel's entreaty a day after she sent it.

She gazed and gazed at the square envelope, with her name and address in the familiar hand, more shaky than she knew it, remembering how often she had seen a little pile of his letters on the writing table at Lulworth House.

Isobel ran down to the kitchen, where she was getting breakfast, to read her letter when she was alone. Mr. Erne was in the passage mopping the floor ineffectually, according to his custom, with cold water.

She tore open the envelope, but waited for a few seconds before unfolding the sheet of paper within . . .

"MY DARLING ISOBEL,

I find—alas!—it is wholly impossible for me to ask you to Lulwater this year. All my friends are sad for me, in fear of the return of illness such as I should not again be able to rise from—I trust, in my own dread, that there may be a safety which there never has been in my confidence. But you must not come.

Forgive me, dear, and believe me to be, now as ever,

Your loving

GODFREY STRANG."

Isobel sat perfectly still, her hands clasped together over the letter on the table. She had given no exclamation of surprise or regret. Her eyes passed from one object to another, listlessly.

She was not thinking of the sunless, underground room, but of the years when she might have gone to Lulwater, the wasted summers, and all for the lack of a little money, a little energy, a little courage.

Cecilia would have gone to any place, had she longed for it half so much. Laura would have coolly brushed aside the obstacles to such a strong desire. She saw her own weakness and blamed only herself.

The hour was past. It would never come back.

Isobel was sure, with strange prescience of Strang's future, it was the last letter he would ever write to her. He said so much in so few words! There was the murmur in it of his own dear voice, wind over the fells, ripple of mountain streams, dip of oars in the quiet lake. She was a child again, listening to the soundless echo of happy

sounds, feeling the remembered touch of hands that were gone, seeing the beauty of things unseen.

She had often watched the grey mists of coming night fall over Lulwater. So the grey mists of sorrow and bitter disappointment enwrapped her spirit now. She had never been so desolate, so weary of her dull home, so conscious of the aimlessness of her life.

* * * * *

That night Isobel slipped out of the house, directly her mother's supper was put away, to meet Franklin Osborne secretly.

He was waiting for her in the shadow of the trees. Their trysting place was a broad, semi-private road between Bayswater and Kensington, not half an hour's walk from Fossingham Street. With hardly any passers-by, an occasional carriage or cycle on the road, and the branches of trees hanging like a roof over their heads, it was almost as solitary as a country lane. Motors, still new to London and usually casting an abominable smell into the air, were not allowed to pass through the gates at either end.

The Erne girls had trundled their hoops up and down this pleasant walk when they were little; Arthur and Laura had paced demurely there during their engagement, and Isobel had often and often strolled backwards and forwards in happy or melancholy mood. For three weeks she had been meeting Osborne, at the same time, five nights out of seven.

"Sweetheart!" he exclaimed, as they drew near to each other; "Dearest! My love!"

He stooped down, bare-headed, to greet her with a kiss, but she drew back so decisively that he could not pretend to misunderstand. They shook hands instead. Then he took a lovely half open rose out of his buttonhole and pinned it on her little old coat.

"Oh, thank you! Did you buy this for me?" asked Isobel.

"Of course I did. Why will you only let me give you flowers? You can't keep them in the house unseen, and it would be so easy to smuggle anything else," he answered.

Isobel carried her gloves in her left hand ; Osborne lifted the other and kissed it a dozen times. Then he bent over her again, drawing her close.

“ Oh, let me kiss you, Isobel ! Why not ? I’ve been waiting here for an hour, and yesterday you didn’t come at all. You look so sweet in the soft moonlight—just once—I promise I’ll be gentle this time—you pretty thing——”

So he kissed her just once—and twice—and three times—until she pulled herself angrily away. He let her go with reluctance and still kept her hand, continually pressing, releasing, and pressing her wrist.

It would have been impossible for Isobel to define her feeling for this man and the reason why she met him night after night. At times she thought it was love, for he moved and excited her as no one else—Joe Hesketh, for instance—had ever done.

The monotony of home drove her to escape, and Osborne’s flattery and devotion helped her to forget it for a little while. He made her feel her own importance in his eyes ; studied her moods, and perpetually talked about her charm for him and his love for her.

He was a man who found it hard to approach any woman, who was young enough or attractive enough to please his eyes, with ordinary friendship. Not that he was so foolish as to make love too easily or too often, but for the simple reason that he was an egoist who longed to awaken every woman’s interest, curiosity and tenderness.

Some men have such narrow hearts that they can barely find room for one—Osborne’s was so wide that he felt he could have lodged them all.

To every philanderer—and Franklin could have been called by a very different name—a time of retribution comes. It may last but an hour, or haunt him for years. Usually unexpected, the blow falls heavily, making the faithless faithful ; the mocker, serious. In more commonplace words, some wily woman, or unconscious chit of a girl, turns the tables on the universal lover.

It was so with Franklin Osborne. He found himself hopelessly, deeply, desperately in love with Isobel Erne.

Never, since his first youth, had he thought of any

woman as he thought of this simple, self-possessed girl. While her indifference may have increased his ardour, it did not account for the change in him. He loved her, as far as he was capable, disinterestedly, being ready to throw his freedom and name at her feet, as the covert offer of money, coupled with promises, had had no effect upon her at all. Indeed, he never knew if she fully understood him, for her immediate assumption that he had proposed marriage was so proud—or so innocent—that it left him wondering and wondering.

His refusal to go to her home did not strike her at the time, as it did in after-thought, as of any importance. Less conventional than Laura, and less shrewd than Cecilia, the youngest Erne girl was satisfied with his specious reasons. Their romance was too beautiful, he said, to be spoilt by commonplace introductions, meetings, discussions with her family or his own.

At the same time he talked about his sister and told Isobel that he longed for them to meet. He also persuaded her to promise silence. She was entreated not to mention his name:—

“Whisper it to yourself, dearest, but not aloud. Your name is the ‘open, sesame!’ to my heart, but no one hears it.”

On the night of their meeting, after a long day of disappointment following the letter from Lulwater, Isobel astounded Osborne.

In all his dreams of an impossibly happy future, when she had learned to adore him as he deserved, he had never believed that she would speak the vital word so soon, giving him the key to this imaginary Paradise.

The hour and the place affected her. They were alone under the trees in the silver silence of a starry night.

With his arms round her, his shadowed face bent down, and his low voice in her ears, she thought of her days at home with sudden loathing. Passionate self-pity overwhelmed her; it deadened her to everything else, whispering that she loved this man, but youth and love would soon be over, and finding utterance at last in panting words that she had never thought to speak.

“Franklin! If you care for me so much—I’ll run away with you—I’ll marry you—let me go for a minute—

look in my eyes ! Do you love me ? Truly—truly—Franklin ? ”

No need to repeat his answer, they hardly knew what was said, for the time had passed for dalliance. Before Isobel had been able to realise the full meaning of her words, he had bound her to stand by them and they seemed irrevocable.

She would have hesitated even then, if Osborne, with a man's decision and stronger initiative, had not made his plans in a minute.

They were to go away together on the following morning. He would take her to his sister's house in Surrey, with whom she could stop until their marriage. A letter was to be left behind at Fossingham Street, partly to allay her people's anxiety, partly to check pursuit.

Osborne was exultant. Even his supreme egotism was mastered for a little while by his admiration of her courage. She trusted him, and he swore he would be worthy of her trust.

He looked towards the future with the confidence of a man who had dared and won ; he thought of the past with gratitude for the tolerance of Providence in its treatment of good fellows. Providence knew that he had always been a good fellow at heart.

Isobel had to promise, before they parted, to meet him at the appointed hour, whatever happened. It was no light promise, gaily spoken, but a solemn pledge.

When he let her go, at last, she left him so swiftly that he felt as if he had not held a living girl in his arms, but a wraith who vanished instantly into the shadows of the trees.

Isobel opened the door very softly at Fossingham Street. The house was more airless and gloomy than usual, or she thought it so.

Her father was coughing dreadfully. It was the first year that he had had bronchitis all through the summer months. She stood outside his room for several minutes, her hand on the door. It was long since she had offered to do anything for him. He was like an animal in suffering, anxious to be hidden and alone.

She could hear him muttering now and again to himself

the clink of his cup of water as he put it back on the saucer. She tapped softly, half hoping he would not hear it.

"Who's there? Come in, Belle," he said.

It gave her a little touch of happiness that he should expect her to think of him.

"What do you want?" he asked; then, seeing her hat and coat:—"Good God! Is it still so early? Have you only just come in?"

"Yes, father. Can I do anything for you?"

"Move away that bottle of stuff Laura brought. Throw it down the sink. I won't take it. Get me some fresh water. That's all."

Isobel stood beside his bed for a minute. His face looked very old and pallid in the moonlight streaming through the window. The curtains were drawn back so that he could look out.

A paroxysm of coughing over, he lay with closed eyes and lips a little open. At intervals there was a slight nervous twitch of his body stretched at full length under the sheet. It looked like a skeleton in the bed.

Isobel stooped to touch his forehead with her lips, but drew back, afraid of disturbing him. She watched until he fell into a light sleep, gradually breathing more tranquilly.

There was fruit on the table beside him and a box of lozenges. Laura had been there. Laura was good enough in buying presents, although she had less sympathy and affection for their father than either of his other daughters.

When Isobel went to her room she felt too tired for definite thought, for the thrilling evening with Franklin Osborne had robbed her of vitality.

It was a long time before she could rest, however, turning from side to side in her bed, disturbed by hurried, incongruous dreams while half asleep and half awake.

* * * * *

Hope, excitement, and fitful happiness rushed into Isobel's room with the morning light.

She rose early, did her usual work in the house, and prepared breakfast for her mother. She heard her

father moving about at seven o'clock, muttering to himself as usual, so she knew he was feeling better.

It was Laura's day for a weekly visit, which meant there would be no dinner to cook. Mrs. Arthur Welwyn, with her nurse and children, took possession of Fossingham Street on these occasions, like a conquering army, very strong in the commissariat.

It was easy for Isobel to carry her bag out of the house unobserved. Her mother was in bed, far from the windows. She waited until Mr. Erne was at breakfast in the parlour behind the shop. Then she gave final directions to the charwoman—fortunately a new broom—opened the side door, closed it softly, and was gone.

She left a note for Laura on the kitchen mantelpiece, not telling her the great news, but simply saying that she, Isobel, was going into the country with a friend and would not be home until the following day.

Fossingham Street was still yawning, with unswept doorways and dusty shop windows. The eight o'clock postman was knocking his way along Bayswater Road. The omnibuses were full of people journeying westward ho! It was a fresh, breezy morning, sunny and cloudless.

Directly Isobel turned out of Fossingham Street she met her lover.

His expression was anxious and ill-humoured—Franklin hated early rising—but it cleared instantly. She had not failed him! He had dreaded that she would not come, in spite of her solemn promise.

Isobel, sensitive to every mood, felt that the eagerness of their last meeting had given place to a very different feeling. He was sure of her. His voice and manner expressed self-confidence and authority. She was not sorry for the change. It banished her sense of responsibility. She liked him better than in moments of emotion, hardly able to believe that the calm, practical lover of the morning was the lover from whom she had parted, half in fear, on the previous night.

Osborne told her he had written to his sister. She would expect them in the early evening.

"We will make for Sterry, a little place off the beaten track, this morning," said Osborne; "And go on to

Violet's house when the splendour of the day's over."

He signaled to a passing cab, one of the last of the old hansoms, and told the man to drive to Waterloo.

Isobel bent forward in her seat to see the end of Fossingham Street. The trees of the old garden had recently been cut down and the wall demolished. She could plainly see the line of tall, narrow houses, but not her father's little shop.

A pang of remorse shot through her, agonizing in its intensity. She turned and impulsively gripped Osborne by the arm.

"Oh, stop! I can't go——" she said.

"My darling!" he exclaimed.

Her hand was held in his, he looked into her dark, wild eyes with smiling assurance, and soothed her with murmured words of admiration.

Isobel stared down the road in front of them, with difficulty recovering her self-control.

Sunshine streamed over the sky and earth. Suddenly she was conscious of the response in her quickened blood to the touch of Osborne's hand and the sound of his voice. Her heart leapt to the adventure. She felt the thrill and call of youth to youth, love to love.

It was the exultation of a minute, but its after-glow dazzled her eyes, confused her mind, and enveloped the man at her side with its own radiance.

CHAPTER XIII

ONE DAY—AND HOW IT ENDED

It was noon when the runaway lovers reached Sterry.

Only one incident had disturbed Isobel's composure. At Waterloo, while she was waiting for Osborne to return to her with the tickets, the unexpected had happened in the appearance of her old admirer, young George Starling, like a reproachful ghost from Bayswater *via* Clerkenwell.

Young George was so far disguised in that he wore big, round spectacles with magnifying lenses. Isobel recognized him before he saw her. She turned and looked in another direction, but he did not take the hint.

"Why, isn't it Miss Is'bel?" said George Starling, bringing his glasses, like small carriage lamps, to bear on her face.

"Oh, George Starling!" she exclaimed, after a second's hesitation; "How are you? We haven't met for so long. You don't visit your father at our house very often, George."

This was a little malicious, suggesting that he was an undutiful son.

"Well, you see, I'm kept pretty close to the bench, Miss Is'bel, and my eyes have been very dicky," said young George, at once in despair; "I've had to give up fine work altogether. I stuck to it till I was half blind, I did reely."

"I hope you're more comfortable, living with your sister and brother-in-law, than you were in Fossingham Street," said Isobel, more kindly.

"Oh, I was very comfortable there, Miss Is'bel. It was a kind of a garden of Eden to me, our back kitchen was."

"What do you mean?" asked Isobel, watching for Osborne.

"Didn't we have a happy time though!" he exclaimed; "There was you, cooking Mrs. Erne's bacon in the front kitchen, and there was me, cleaning my dad's boots in the back yard. If that isn't like the garden of Eden I'd like to know what is."

"Well, I must say good-bye, George," said Isobel, hastily, as Osborne appeared in the distance.

"Off for a day's 'out' in the country, I s'pose?" said young George, blinking at her dismally through the carriage lamps.

"I have no idea when I'm coming back to town. Good-bye!"

She offered her hand, smiled, and turned to meet Osborne.

George Starling watched them pass through the barrier and walk down the platform. Indeed, he stood immovable, staring after them and jostled by passers-by, until their train had steamed away.

* * * * *

Sterry was like the picture of a village in an old story book, all honeysuckle and roses. There was a public green, where the whitest of white geese cackled; a little brown church and school-house; old fashioned houses, and a real country inn—heavy archway leading to paved stable yard, wainscoted coffee room, flowery garden, cheery landlady taking stock of visitors from her little office window, friendly landlord taking their money at the bar, ubiquitous waiter taking tips wherever he could get them, sleek tabby cat and two kittens taking the air on the door steps.

Sterry, being three miles from a railway station, the Queen's Head was chiefly patronized by driving parties and the private motors which were just beginning to spoil the country roads.

Franklin Osborne and Isobel found their way to the little village by long, meandering lanes and narrow paths across the fields.

The air was full of the sounds and scents of July. Poppies blazed amongst the wheat. The tangled hedge-rows were gemmed with little wild flowers, and the starry

blossoms of the blackberry bushes shone among parched leaves.

Isobel was not happy, but so excited—gay—unlike herself—that Osborne could hardly conceal his amazement, mingled with delight. He had never before seen her in such a mood. The grave, arresting charm of her beauty flashed into quick retort of word and glance; she held him at arm's length, attracting, repelling, wholly mistress of herself.

Osborne was captivated in a new way. He lost something of his confidence, not a jot of his determination, and adapted himself with the quickness of a skilful wooer.

It was pleasant enough, he thought, to play at love for an hour or two. So he laughed with Isobel at trifles, allowed her to outstrip him when they raced, feigned to be content with kisses like the brush of a butterfly, and generally acted the delicate boy-lover to the life.

At Sterry it was not such an effort for him, for they were no longer alone. Once or twice, in the quiet lanes, he had been obliged to struggle with himself not to give up the part he played so cleverly.

They chose a table, in the coffee room, overlooking the garden.

The perfume of a big cluster of honeysuckle, fastened in Isobel's dress, passed across Osborne's face in a breeze from the open window. It was sweet to him beyond words. The sun had touched her face to warmer colour than he had seen before. She avoided his eyes for more than a fleeting glance. Her laughter was all gone. Once more he was puzzled by the change, but none the less enraptured.

Osborne doted on every movement and feature of the girl, oblivious of other people in the room, as a dealer in precious stones on a diamond of the finest water that he means to buy.

When he spoke of Fossingham Street, to test her feelings on leaving home, she stopped him at once.

"I want to forget it for a little while, Franklin. Don't remind me again."

"Then you are absolutely happy and content to be with me, dear?" he asked.

"Yes! Oh, yes!" she said, quickly.

After lunch they strolled in the old world garden, hand in hand, Isobel talking about the flowers, Osborne pretending to look at them, admiring where she admired, but hardly turning his eyes from her face for a minute. Then they sat down in the shade of a great horse-chestnut, Osborne on the grass beside Isobel's chair, conscious now and again of the too sweet scent of the honeysuckle.

The temperate air of the morning had become charged at midday with intense heat. A sultry wind puffed out of the west.

Time was confused in Isobel's mind, for it seemed to be days and days—weeks and weeks of an endless summer—since they left London. She did not speak. Her eyelids drooped, opened, and drooped again until the soft lashes were at rest. Even her right hand, as Osborne held it, seemed to fall asleep; the left rested on her knee, palm upward.

How young she looked! He studied her face in repose with a strange, questioning expression on his own. It was like a book that he thought he had known by heart, suddenly to discover new meanings and a hidden mystery between the lines.

He tried to persuade himself that she loved him utterly. There was no self-reproach in his mind for taking advantage of her loneliness at home, a desperate mood, or the effect on her pliant nature of his stronger personality.

At the same time, to make this idyll perfect, how he wished that she loved him utterly

"Isobel! Isobel! My darling! Isobel!"

Isobel's dreaming spirit seemed to be flung back into her body. There was a loud whisper in her ear and the clutch of hands on her shoulders.

Osborne was stooping over her. She could feel his breath on her face. He pulled her to her feet roughly before she was fully awake.

"Oh!—Franklin——" she exclaimed, but was stopped by his hand over her mouth.

"Hush! It's all right. Don't be frightened. I want you to come into the house at once. Quick, dear! It's all right—this way——"

Throwing his arm round her waist, he almost carried the astounded girl away from the horse-chestnut, and into

a drawing room, with French windows, where they had waited on their arrival until lunch was ready.

"What's the matter? You look so odd and scared. Franklin!" cried Isobel, staring at him.

Again he touched her lips, to make her silent, and moved hastily to a part of the room where they could not be seen from the garden.

"It's all right," he repeated for the third time; "I don't want you to be seen, that's all."

"Why not?" she asked, and, hardly believing him to be in earnest, took a step towards the open windows.

"Come back!" he exclaimed, angrily; "I caught sight of Cecilia and her husband in the garden."

"Cecilia?" cried Isobel; "Impossible!"

"I tell you I saw them both. They came out of the dining room. We must get away from this place at once."

"How do you know it was my sister? When did you see her before?" asked Isobel.

She moved away from his encircling arm, looking at him earnestly, but with no suspicion in her face, only the dawning of wonder and puzzled thought.

"I haven't seen her before. I left you asleep for a few minutes, under the tree, and I happened to glance at the Visitors' Book, in the office, as I went through the hall. I recognized your sister's name."

"You said you saw them coming out of the dining room, Franklin."

"So I did—afterwards. Don't look at me like that! I'm troubled about you, darling, not about myself. They mustn't find you here alone with me. They don't know we're going to be married."

"We can tell them. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Let me go to Cecilia—let me go——"

They had both spoken quickly, standing face to face, eyes on eyes.

At her last words, Isobel sprang towards the garden, and, at the same second, Osborne caught her in his arms.

She was helpless. He dragged her two hands round his neck, as if she was embracing him, and held them there with one of his own, while he crushed her to his breast with the other.

* * * * *

Isobel knew !

In that minute, with that one gesture, he had shown her the awful truth.

She knew he was the man whom she had seen with Cecilia on the night of the burned letters. She knew he had been her sister's lover. She knew he was a liar and seducer.

It was indescribably cruel—shameful—humiliating—for Isobel to be clasped in Osborne's embrace, against her will, and to feel his lips upon her hair when she turned her face down to avoid them. She no longer struggled, for all her woman's brain was at work to escape him.

The instinctive cunning of sudden and apparently complete surrender answered its purpose. It frightened him. For a moment he thought she had fainted, and the next a brutal triumph and pride swept over him.

For all her delicacy, he thought, this girl was an elemental creature of passion, loving and yielding to force. She was his ! His fears and compunction fled as he recovered all his usual self-possession, pretending to laugh at himself and his violence.

Of course there was no reason why they should not meet Reuben and his wife, he assured her, but it was discreet, perhaps, to wait until she was married. It would be such a happy, glorious surprise for her sister—what do you say, my darling ? My love !

With all his assumed ease and indifference, as if he left the decision with her, Osborne could not control his restless eyes from glancing towards the garden, or keep his mouth steady. It twitched, and he plucked at it with a shaking hand.

Directly Isobel was free from his grasp, standing a few feet away from him, her power of action returned. She knew it was only a lull in the storm. The man who spoke so considerately, smiling fondly, was the same man who had used his strength against hers, but a few minutes past, striking terror into her soul.

She did not answer him. He laughed again and began to rally her for being angry without a reason. Isobel little knew that every minute he counted of value, hoping and believing that the Reubens' had stopped at the Sterry hotel only for lunch.

He was right. They suddenly heard the sound of the landlord's loud voice in a cheery good-bye, and Reuben's answer. Isobel made for the door of the room leading into the hall. Osborne put his back against it.

"You dear little fool!" he exclaimed.

She turned, quick as a flash, and ran into the garden.

Osborne burst out laughing—really laughing for the first time—knowing she would have to go half round the house and through the stable yard to reach the road. He was right in thinking that Ben Reuben's automobile would be the best that money could buy in those early days, and his man a swift driver.

All that Isobel could see, when she ran under the archway into the road, was a swirl of dust in the distance that lessened and lessened as the car sped on.

"Cissy! Cissy!" she cried, wildly, before she could stop herself.

Osborne was watching her from the steps of the hotel. He expected a burst of indignation, perhaps a shower of tears, but when Isobel slowly turned towards him she was calm and even smiling.

"Too late!" was all she said, with a shrug of her shoulders; then, looking up at him from below the steps:—"When are we going to drive back to the station?"

"Not yet, dearest. Surely you can be happy in the garden for a little longer," he answered.

"No, I'm weary of Sterry."

He drew close. She stooped to look at a flower, avoiding his touch.

"There's a lovely little wood, not more than half a mile from this hotel," said Osborne, softly; "Shall we go to see it, Belle?"

"Not now," she replied.

"Later? Will you go later, darling?"

Isobel smiled again, but would give no promise. She strolled back into the garden and seated herself within sight of the windows of the house, in spite of Osborne's whispered entreaties to return to their old place beneath the great horse-chestnut.

He threw himself into a low chair at her side, and began to talk all the fond and foolish nonsense of

the beginning of the day. It jarred upon him. Perhaps he was still agitated by the scene in the house; perhaps he was puzzled and provoked by the return of Isobel's mood of silence; perhaps he was too conscious of acting a part before an unappreciative audience—for some reason or another, Franklin was painfully ill at ease.

If he touched his companion's hand she did not immediately draw it away, but it felt as unresponsive as a glove in his. The most extravagant praises of her beauty fell on apparently deaf ears. It might have been the end of the honeymoon, he thought, and it had not even begun.

Tea was carried out to them, and taken almost in silence. The waiter thought they had quarrelled, and compared the sulky girl very unfavourably with the lively, handsome lady who had lunched at the hotel and driven away in a fine new motor car.

It was five o'clock before Osborne agreed to leave Sterry. Isobel had asked him several times to see about the carriage, ignoring all his talk of the pleasure of walking in the cool of the late afternoon.

He rose at last, bound to believe that she was very tired, for her face and attitude suggested the languor of complete exhaustion. She looked as wan and drooping as the faded honeysuckle in her dress.

"Stay where you are, my poor little darling, till the carriage is at the door," said Osborne; "I'll go into the stable and make them hurry. There's a train at about six. We shall reach my sister's house before seven."

He stooped to kiss her. She turned her face on one side against the cushion, so that he could only touch her cheek, not her lips. Then he walked away, slowly and thoughtfully, in the direction of the stable.

There was an extraordinary change in Isobel's expression when he left her alone, but she did not move an inch for several seconds. Her languid eyes opened wide, then narrowed as she glanced sideways, like the eyes of an animal about to spring; a quiver passed over her body, as if the muscles and nerves were suddenly freed from severe tension.

She drew herself to her feet, looked after him, snatched

up her hat from the ground beside her chair, and ran through the open French windows of the drawing-room into the hall. It was empty. She caught a glimpse of the landlady, with some needlework in her hands, nodding in her chair, and she saw the waiter was standing on the steps, his back towards her.

The Visitors' Book was lying open on a little ledge in front of the office. In less than a minute Isobel had glanced through the short list beneath the current date. She was not surprised at the absence of the Reubens' name, but it made assurance doubly sure.

She walked calmly out of the hotel. The waiter turned at the sound of her footsteps.

"Will you tell the gentleman, when he asks for me, that I've started to the station?" she said; "It's straight down the road till one comes to some fields on the left, isn't it?"

The waiter officiously repeated her own words.

He watched her walk away at a good pace, but not too quickly, and then went on with his occupation of looking about him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FLIGHT

ISOBEL's little walk to the curve in the road appeared, in her imagination, like a distance of miles. When it was turned she was out of view from the hotel.

She knew that Franklin Osborne might pursue her at any minute. Her heart was beating so violently that it positively sounded like distant footsteps in her ears. She dared not look round until she had made the curve.

It was three miles to the station. Isobel's first thought had been to run as quickly and as far as she could, trusting not to be overtaken. The hopelessness of such a foolish plan made her give it up directly she was alone on the road.

After hesitating for a few seconds, looking to the right and left, she resolved not to make for the station until the evening. Osborne would be sure to follow and wait for her there. Perhaps she could find her way to another part of the line. For the present she determined to lie low, suppressing her wild desire for rapid flight.

A long, open stretch of fields on the right side offered no cover; there was a dark clump of trees about two hundred yards on the left. She could see no break in the hedge. There was nothing for it but to hurry on until she came to a gate, or a place where it would be possible to scramble through. The trees doubtless surrounded the little wood Osborne had described to her.

At first Isobel ran so quickly that even her youth and strength were sorely taxed. The thought of the dreaded man's fierce embrace lashed her on. Fear and excitement altered the look of the world—the white road stretched to infinitude before her eyes, she could hear nothing but the thud-thud of her own rushing feet, and she thought there was the sound of Osborne's voice.

For the minute she was simply mad, at one with the hunted animal that is wholly possessed by the instinct of flight.

At a sharp dip in the hedge there was a five-barred gate. Isobel climbed over and ran across the uneven ground of a stubble field without slackening speed. It was the most hazardous time in the escape, for her pale-coloured dress gleamed in the sunshine, flashing back the rays of light in every fluttering movement.

She thought of that when the wood was reached, pushing on and on until she was in the very heart of its cool shadows. Then she sank down on the bole of an old oak, still panting, and straining her ears for distant noises from the road.

After a little while the beauty and murmuring sounds of the wood stole over her senses. Sunshine rippled and dripped through the quivering boughs, making little emerald pools in the grass. Fronds and the broad spread of full-grown ferns sprang up from the myriad brown leaves of past summers. The air was filled with birds' chirrup and twitter and song.

Isobel began to feel calm and steady; she could even smile at her own terrors, but would not allow herself to think of the true cause of her determination to part from Franklin Osborne.

She had never loved him. The realization of his worthlessness had shown her that, for her amazement and horror had had no touch of sorrow. At the same time, he had attracted her senses. She liked to look at him, listen to him, feel his touch.

He was a delightful flatterer, and the lonely girl had not looked beyond the hour. They had passed a very happy, innocent day together, as Isobel acknowledged long afterwards, although it was all darkened at the time of her flight by the discovery of his villainy.

It suddenly flashed into her mind that Osborne, when he did not find her at the station, might remember his own words about the little wood and guess where to look for her.

She rose and made her way farther and farther into the wood, trying to keep a path that was parallel with the high road. It was impossible to tell the exact time,

as she had no watch, but on reaching the end of the straggling trees Isobel saw that the sun was setting.

A steep bank and a ditch lay between the road and herself. There was a cart on the opposite side, standing in front of a cottage. An old man, sitting beside the driver's seat, stared at her sudden appearance from the wood as if it was a ghost. Isobel crossed the road and asked him the way to the nearest railway station.

The old man jerked his head towards the cottage. He was stone deaf. At the same minute two young women and a crowd of small children appeared at the door, being his grand-daughter and a married friend with her family.

Isobel repeated her question to the women. One said it was a goodish bit, and the other said it was quite a walk. The grand-daughter stared at the girl's dusty shoes and stockings, and the dead honeysuckle in her belt. She looked a sad little creature, having torn and discoloured her light dress pushing through blackberry bushes.

"We're goin' past the station on our way home," said the young woman; "I'll give you a lift if you like to get up behind."

Isobel thanked her heartily, and, if they were starting soon, accepted the kind offer.

"We shall be off d'reckly minute," replied the young woman.

Isobel climbed into the little seat behind and waited as patiently as she could while all the children were caught and kissed, an affectionate farewell bawled to grandfather, and a difference of opinion regarding the treatment of a despondent hen settled between the two friends.

Then the young woman took her place, the children shouted, and the horse, which had hitherto looked like a wooden animal, he was so very quiet, started with such spirit that Isobel had to cling to the rail of the seat in front. They covered the ground at an amazing pace. The driver, whenever the horse showed an inclination to slow down, told him to "Come on then!" and he obligingly kept to his original gait.

The road was new to Isobel. She was certain that

the fields and lanes were different from those she had crossed in the morning. When she reached the end of the drive, however, it was the same railway station.

The peculiar horse stopped and became wooden while Isobel thanked her unknown friend again and again, then he started with renewed energy, while his driver waved her hand and the old grandfather bumped up and down in his seat like a ball.

Isobel saw, by a clock inside the booking office, that it was nearly eight. She had lingered in the wood much longer than she knew. It appeared that the last train for London that night was at nine o'clock. An hour to wait! It meant she could not hope to reach home until after ten.

The booking clerk did not seem to take any notice of her as she bought her ticket. But when he came out of his office, a few minutes afterwards, he stared at her curiously. She walked slowly down the platform. He followed, begged her pardon, and was she the young lady a gentleman had expected to meet earlier in the afternoon.

Isobel pretended to look puzzled, pondered a minute, and shook her head. The clerk said "Sorry, miss!" What he thought was another matter, being anxious to earn Osborne's tip.

It was a long platform, open to the road at both ends. As Isobel walked away from the clerk, with well assumed indifference, her dread of meeting Osborne came back with redoubled force. She had fondly believed her difficulties were over. There was little doubt he would return to the station before the London train was due.

Waiting until the booking clerk had disappeared, Isobel slipped away. She crossed the road and walked towards a couple of houses she had noticed in driving past. In the front garden of the first there was a home-made sign board with three words upon it, the writer's spelling having given out at the last:—"Teas. Minerals. Diners." As if to atone for this, he had placed a smaller sign within the open door inscribed:—"To the dinning room."

Isobel was very hungry and thirsty, but too restless

to wait for tea to be made, so she bought some rock cakes and drank a glass of milk.

Then, making her way across a piece of waste land to an old barn, she sat down on a pile of logs and steadily gnawed through the specimens of rock cake, peeping out now and again at the clock of the distant church tower.

The waiting hour passed slowly. Isobel was undisturbed, except for the appearance of a small black cat. She was a long time tempting the little animal into the barn. Once across the threshold, it purred loudly and rubbed itself against her dress in a most companionable way.

At five minutes to nine Isobel started for the station, approaching it at the end farthest away from the booking office. Her plan was to wait in the road below, in the shadow of the trees, until the last minute before the train moved, step on to the low platform and jump into the first carriage she could reach.

About twenty people were standing in little groups, with their packages at their feet. There was no sign of Franklin Osborne. Isobel was alarmed, as the train was signaled, to see the booking clerk walking along the platform, peering to the right and left, for she felt certain he was looking for her. She stooped and ducked underneath some projecting planks where she could not be seen from above.

The booking clerk stopped, for some reason she did not at first know, so close to her that it suggested discovery. There was the sound of the approaching train. At the same minute she heard a quick step and a voice she knew:—

“Well? Have you seen the lady?”

“Can’t say I have, sir, as yet. She isn’t on the platform or in the waiting room.”

“She *must* have caught the earlier train!” exclaimed Osborne.

“Yes, sir, if it wasn’t the young lady I told you about.”

The train ran into the station as the booking clerk said the last words. The girl crouching out of sight, almost beneath their feet, listened—listened—hoping to hear Osborne go away. She dared not move.

"London—London only!" shouted the one porter.

She could hear him already beginning to bang the carriage doors.

"Damn! I can't miss it—sprint along the platform and jump her in if she runs up at the last second," said Osborne, and the clerk sprinted as fast as his legs could carry him.

The shutting of doors grew louder and louder, followed by the sound of the guard's whistle. There was a confusion of voices. A child piped, "Goo'bye, goo'bye!"

Isobel dipped from beneath the planks and raised herself just high enough to look over the edge of the platform. She saw Osborne, holding the carriage door open, with one foot on the step, staring down the platform for a signal from the booking clerk. He looked hot, angry, dusty, and very tired.

An unsuccessful hunter often cuts a deplorable figure.

Isobel stooped again. The train began to move before he jumped in. It moved quicker and quicker—it was gone.

* * * * *

Isobel's sense of relief was so great that she could think of nothing else. The country was freed of Franklin Osborne!

She no longer dreaded every curve of the road, every shadow in the distance, every sound in the air. It was a lovely summer evening, she noticed for the first time, with the new moon looking like one solitary silver cloud already to be seen in the blue sky. There was the scent of mignonette from a cottage garden, and no sound but the barking of a dog far away and the good-night song of thrushes.

Isobel sat down on the step of a stile to count her money. She had left home with only a few shillings in her purse—no, that was not Isobel, but the fool who had trusted and thought she loved Franklin Osborne—and more than half had been spent on her ticket for London.

Nothing would have induced her to return to the hotel, even had her purse been well filled, and she shrank from the curiosity of the village people if she tried to get a room at one of the cottages. It was happily too late

for the booking clerk to betray her, should they meet again, but he would be sure to gossip, even suspect her her of running away from her husband . . . if Osborne had been her husband, indeed ! . . . once again she had to thrust the knowledge of her discovery out of her mind, for it swept over her spirit like a black cloud.

She got to her feet and turned in the direction of the old barn. Many city-bred girls would have been afraid to stop by themselves in such a place for the night. Isobel thought of it gratefully. She hoped the little cat would be there to bear her company.

There was no door to the old barn. Isobel found that by keeping in one corner she could not be seen by passers-by. She carried some logs over to make herself as comfortable a seat as possible. She did not intend to sleep, at all events until the dark hours of the night were over.

At first she listened anxiously, occasionally venturing to look out. No one came. Now and again there was the rumble of heavy waggons in the distant lane or from the high road, the hoot of a motor three or four times, and at ten o'clock some man or boy was whistling so shrilly, on his homeward way, that she could recognize the tune. The cat did not return.

Isobel began to feel intensely lonely, but no longer afraid of being discovered. She believed that fear would not return. After a while, she paced backwards and forwards the whole length of the barn, softly repeating all the poetry she knew by heart.

Her thoughts were now in Fossingham Street, now at Laura's house, now with Cissy—wherever she might be. She tried not to think of Osborne at all.

What would Laura say to her adventure ?

Lol had grown so conventional that she objected to girls, even in novels, who did anything to make themselves "conspicuous." It was a polite adjective made to cover a multitude of sins. Isobel wondered whether she had made herself more conspicuous by running away with a young man, or running away from him ; also, was it hopelessly conspicuous to sit in a barn all night ? Fortunately, Laura would never know what had happened.

Cecilia must not be told. Never! Never! Although Cissy did not speak of the secret of the past, her sister had often seen its memory burning in the darkness of her eyes, making her look for the moment old, haggard, passion-wrecked.

* * * * *

Isobel lay down upon her hard bed, wondering whether the night had turned. She could no longer see the clock in the church tower. Although it was warm, there was a fresh, strange feeling in the air. The world seemed to shudder. The new moon had brightened into the "intense lamp" on the night sky. A bat flew out of the hidden beams over Isobel's head. There was a mournful, weird cry of an owl.

The dark spirit of Fear stole into the barn and lurked among the shadows.

Isobel felt her blood rushing to fever heat through her veins, and then turning cold under its touch.

At first her terror was merely vague, suggesting old fancies, bringing back the recollection of half forgotten stories of dread spectres, but very soon it changed and took definite form in her mind and imagination.

She stood up, staring at the wide entrance to the barn, possessed with the idea that she had heard the step and whispering voice of Franklin Osborne. She told herself in vain that he was far away, she had seen him go, he would not know where to find her even if he had returned.

Fear would not listen to reason.

She felt certain he was there, watching, waiting, looking at her, although she could not see him yet, with the expression on his face she had surprised there a hundred times, but never understood until to-day.

It seemed a long time, perhaps it was several minutes, that she stood immovable, fighting her terror; realizing—if he was indeed there—her helplessness. Then she made a wild spring towards the open space, to meet him in the moonlight, not in the horrible darkness that lay behind her

Isobel stood alone, revived by the soft breeze, with the pale grass beneath her feet, the leafy boughs stirring over her head, and not a soul to be seen, near or far.

The church tower was black against the sky, and the roofs of a little farm and some cottages loomed in the middle distance. It cheered her to think of the sleeping people, not so very far away. She would have loved to creep near to the walls of a house and lie down there, knowing that only a few bricks divided her from fellow creatures.

She thought of the homeless, the wanderers, the outcasts of the world. Mingled with her pity was a sense of the bondage of life as she and those whom she loved had always lived it; slaves to a house, tied to their sticks and silver, stooping to the earth under the weight of possessions.

Roseglade and his wife, of all the men and women she knew, were the only two who were indifferent to property. They would leave the accumulated treasures of years, she believed, without a single regret if the wander spirit called them away. They had done it before and would again.

Then Isobel thought of Godfrey Strang, repeating his last letter to herself. Read so often, it stayed in her memory. She had never spoken of him to Osborne or her other lover, Joe Hesketh. She had heard Osborne quote from Strang's books. It was doubtful whether Hesketh knew his name.

"If I had been going to Lulwater I should never have run away with Franklin Osborne," said Isobel, sitting down upon the ground, just within the barn, her knees drawn up to her chin, hands clasped round them.

Lulwater. The very word soothed her. She said it over and over again like a charm.

Lulwater!

Lulwater, with the long mirror of the lake, and the misty hills. Lulwater, with its little harbour below Lulworth House . . the musical splash of the oars as the bow of the old Arrow divided the water the lilt of a robin's song "Isobel! Isobel!" Strang's voice calling from the shore as he beckoned to her with his hand she had slipped into a happy dream.

* * * * *

The sun was shining brightly when Isobel woke

flashing on the beams of the old barn, the logs of wood, a broken plough-share, and the rough, dusty floor strewn with faded grass.

There was a warm, soft weight on her knees. It was the little cat, curled into a flattened ball. She could not remember when it came, probably after she was asleep, for she awakened with the feeling of having been wrapped in the deep slumber of exhaustion.

The church clock told her it was between six and seven. Smoke was curling from a chimney of the farm house; there were figures to be seen on the road in the distance; the work of another day had begun.

Isobel looked in vain for a brook to bathe her face and hands, wondering half seriously, half with amusement, whether Osborne had left her bag at the hotel. There was nothing of value in it.

Every hour the thoughtless haste of their elopement came home to her more and more. Her terror of the man had flown with the darkness. She was acutely conscious of feeling, and looking, both pitiable and absurd in the searching light of the morning. Coupled with this, however, was a certain knowledge of herself, born of a new experience. She had passed through her bad hour in the night, alone, and a fear conquered is ever a source of strength.

Isobel threw away the dead honeysuckle which still hung limply from her dress, and made herself as tidy as she could. Then she started for the house near the railway station where they sold "teas, minerals, and diners."

The door was open. She waited until the hostess had shaken a little of the great quantity of dust out of several mats and thrown them back into the passage, then she drew near and asked about having breakfast.

When the good woman had recovered from the shock of the question—she was speechless for several seconds—Isobel was allowed to enter. Teas and dinners were always, so to speak, on tap, but a breakfast was as rarely ordered as a roast peacock.

An hour later Isobel went to the station. The booking clerk greeted her, after a stare of surprise, as cordially as an old friend. Indeed, he looked so very knowing, that she turned and walked away.

"I say, miss," he exclaimed; "You reck'lect that tall gentleman who expected to meet you yesterday afternoon?"

"I recollect that you asked me whether I expected to meet a gentleman, yesterday afternoon, and I shook my head," replied Isobel.

"I say, miss" repeated the clerk, persuasively; "You're the same young lady though, aren't you? Come on!"

She only came on to the point of shaking her head once more.

"That's a pity," he answered, smiling; "Cos the gentleman left a bag in my charge, the first time he came to the station, to be given to you if you asked for it. That is, if you could satisfy me regarding your identity," concluded the clerk, quoting a police witness in a case he had just been reading in last night's paper.

Isobel was slightly embarrassed. She felt inclined to turn haughtily away from the grinning clerk, but she wanted her property.

"If the bag happens to belong to me it has my name, 'Isobel Erne,' on an old luggage label tied to the handle," she said.

"I knew it was the same young lady!" cried the clerk; "Gave him the 'ta-ta!' pretty well last night, didn't you? You should have seen him in the afternoon! He didn't say anything when he found you wasn't here, but he looked as if he'd burst. I'll go and get your bag for you. There's plenty of time, miss, she isn't due for half an hour and then she'll be late."

CHAPTER XV

ROSEGLADE AND ISOBEL. THE DEATH OF HENRY ERNE.

THE sunshine that flooded over fields and gardens, dazzling and delighting Isobel's tired eyes as she stared out of the window of the train, made St. Mark's Square in London appear very dusty and old at a later hour on the same bright morning.

Edward Roseglade was standing at his front door. St. Mark's Square, he truly thought, was not at its best in July. It looked as if it wanted a holiday. The trees of the oblong garden in the centre were pining for rain, the grass was turning brown. A few houses which had been painted in the spring did not look much better than the others, for "they showed the dirt more," as the owners of the unpainted consoled themselves by saying.

Roseglade, newspaper in hand, looked up the street and down the street, and made up his mind to go out of town directly Althea came home. She had been called away from Heron House, unexpectedly and suddenly, on the previous day.

He was about to go indoors when a girl in the distance, walking slowly, and with shoulders lop-sided by the weight of a bag, attracted his attention. It was Isobel Erne. They caught sight of each other at about the same minute. Roseglade went down the steps to meet her.

"This is a welcome surprise!" he said, as they met, taking her burden and shaking hands; "I'm sorry your aunt is not at home. She has gone to see—I mean, she is out on business."

Isobel did not notice the break in his sentence. His casual manner of speaking, evident blindness to her dusty and unkempt appearance, and incurious way of swinging along with the bag, were an unspeakable relief. How she had dreaded queries and exclamations!

They went into the big room, cool, and fragrant with sweet-peas.

"First of all, have you had your breakfast, Belle?" asked Roseglade.

"Oh yes, thank you."

"Then take off your hat and sit down in the most comfortable chair you can find. You look rather tired . . . look here! Would you like to have a bath?"

Isobel could not help laughing, wretched as she felt, at the blunt question. It was so very eccentric to ask a visitor, in the middle of the morning, whether she would like to have a bath.

"Yes, to speak the truth, I should," Isobel replied, as bluntly.

"Good! You know your way about the house. I shall be here when you want me. Our domestic fairy is somewhere on the premises. She fluttered in for the first time last week, so I can't recollect whether her name is Thomson, or Collins—perhaps it isn't either. You ask her. She'll know."

He smiled and nodded to Isobel as she looked back from the door. Then he walked slowly up and down the room, whistling softly to himself.

Oddly enough, she found it more difficult to meet him a second time. What did he think of her? What did he suspect? How had he known she had not come from Fossingham Street? If only aunt Althea had been at home!

So Isobel walked downstairs very slowly, conscious of looking better, and trying to determine what to tell him.

Roseglade greeted her with a question as unexpected as his sudden mention of a bath.

"Belle! Do you know that Roger Bacon described a flying machine six hundred years ago?" Then, seeing her surprised face—"Also, 'there are milestones on the Dover Road' Well, feeling all right now? I asked the fairy to get you a glass of milk and some cake. Fall to! It's a long way from—there."

"Where, Mr. Roseglade?" asked Isobel, obediently falling to.

"Wherever you have come from, to be sure. Belle, I wish you wouldn't call me 'Mr. Roseglade,' If you

object to 'uncle'—it is uncle, isn't it?—say Edward, or Ned, or Old 'un, or Grey-beard, or anything else you like. 'I would answer to Hi! or any loud cry.' ”

“I will call you uncle, of course.”

“Good!”

He took up a book and began to read so earnestly that Isobel took the hint to be silent. He must have peeped at her now and then, for directly she had finished her lunch he closed his book as decisively as he had opened it.

“Will you have any more? No? Feel better? Now, my dear, I think I ought to tell you that we had a note from your sister Laura last night. She was very sorry to say——”

“I don't know why she should have written to you in such a hurry!” Isobel interrupted, flushing; “I told her I should be away from home until to-day. Laura is too officious.”

“Pardon me, Belle, you're mistaken,” said Roseglade, gently; “She didn't write solely about you. She was very annoyed at your absence, I admit, but her chief object was to ask your aunt to go to see your father at once. He seems to be suddenly worse.”

“Oh, Mr. Roseglade! Uncle! Father was fairly well when I left home yesterday morning. He only has bronchitis. Laura is so nervous!” cried Isobel.

“Only!” repeated her companion; “I'm afraid his illness is much more serious than you imagine. Althea started for Bayswater on the instant. She will do her best for him you may be sure. She's a born nurse.”

“I must go home at once!” exclaimed Isobel, jumping up.

“Wait a little longer,” he said, quietly putting out his hand to stop her; “Don't be so distressed. Indeed, you're not fit to rush off again like this. I'll go with you in a few minutes.”

His voice and the touch of his kind hand were too much for Isobel to bear. All the suppressed misery of her adventure—anger, dismay and love turned to hate—overwhelmed her. She burst into passionate tears, dropped into her seat and cried uncontrollably.

Roseglade had felt the storm in the air and was not surprised when it broke.

He drew another chair close, without wasting words, put his arm round Isobel and pressed her head against his shoulder. He knew she wanted sympathy, not advice ; a fellow being to help her with affection ; to be conscious, in her own weakness, of strength being near.

Roseglade did not think of the numberless times in his long life he had so comforted the unhappy, and uplifted the down-trodden, by the simplicity and tolerance of his nature. The compassion and unquestioning tenderness that he felt for Isobel, as if she had been his own child, would have been the same had he known she was a lost woman with shame and sin written on her forehead. Let others judge and condemn. He would only have pitied and consoled.

When he began to talk to the distracted girl, gradually soothing her into quietude, she was amazed by the way he understood her story.

Not a word of Cecilia passed her lips, but she found herself telling him about Osborne and his love, with a frankness that was alien to her character. Isobel thought she was describing only the man she had escaped, but to Roseglade she was revealing herself.

He was deeply moved by her confidence ; spoke to her of life and love as no man or woman had spoken before—wisely, truthfully, temperately ; all with such ease and good sense, even lightly now and again, that she felt like a prisoner set free from old fears and new despair.

" You make me think of Godfrey Strang ! " Isobel said to him, impulsively.

" You flatter me, Belle. Strang is like a great ship, full sail on a calm ocean. I'm a battered old hulk, always drifting into baffling cross-currents."

She was silent a while, still leaning against his shoulder.

" Then you truly think it was right of me, uncle, to run away from Franklin Osborne directly I knew I didn't love him ? "

" In the circumstances, yes."

" He won't forgive me in a hurry. I think he could be very vindictive."

" Don't trouble over that, my dear. You say you can never marry him ? "

" Never. Oh no ! "

"Then see that he doesn't try to break your will. Believe me, Belle, a man who would make an unwilling woman his wife is either a fool or a brute. It may sound very fine in story books—'I shall win your love hereafter'—that sort of thing. But it's wrong. D'you remember how Willoughby Patterne told Lætitia Dale it was a proof of his devotion that he was anxious to marry even without her love? There's your supreme egoist. Self, self, self! Now, what are you going to say to your people at home? Perhaps I'd better warn you that Laura knows you left London yesterday with a man."

"How does she know that?"

"Can't say. Your aunt read me only scraps of her letter. I believe that she promised Althea, like the posters of evening newspapers, 'amazing revelations.'"

"Well, I must face it, whatever Laura and mother choose to think. I had better go home alone. Please don't come with me."

"I wish I could help you, my dear child."

Isobel clasped his big hand with both her own.

"You have been so kind to me, uncle. I shall always remember our talk to-day. If my own father had been half as gentle and considerate—how good you are!"

Roseglade laughed and shook his head.

"I'm afraid some people I know wouldn't agree with you, my sweet Belle—bluebell, harebell, little saint of a Canterbury bell! Good-bye. Tell your aunt Althea not to hurry home if she can be of any use at your house. No, I'm not going to let you take your bag. I'll walk down with it to-night. By-bye!"

So he dismissed her, standing on the steps until she had vanished into the busy road at the end of St. Mark's Square.

* * * * *

The box-maker's side of the shop in Fossingham Street was not open.

Although Mr. Starling had pulled his blind up, he too was absent from the little bench where he usually sat at work. Being sympathetic, Mr. Starling thought it only kind to neglect his business when there was illness in the house and wander up and down the passage, or sit

on the stairs with his head against the wall, or stand in dark corners like a ghost unaccustomed to the premises.

Laura Welwyn had taken command, when she was hastily summoned by her mother, after Henry Erne's collapse. It was Laura who had promptly sent for a doctor, aunt Althea, and a quantity of medicated cotton wool, hoping by the application of the last named to prevent her father, like a piece of jewellery sent by post, from breaking to pieces altogether.

She may have felt a little self-reproachful. She certainly was ready to reproach everybody else. So, when Isobel knocked at the door and was admitted by Mr. Starling, Laura leaned over the banisters upstairs to greet her with great severity in voice and face.

"Is that Isobel? So you have come home at last! My poor mother began to think we should never see you again."

"Oh, Laura!" cried Isobel, running up the first flight.

"Don't make such a noise!" said Laura, in a loud, angry whisper; "My father is dangerously ill. My aunt Althea is sitting with him."

"You needn't appropriate everybody!" exclaimed Isobel; "I'll go to father at once."

"He won't take any notice of you, Isobel. He hardly speaks to *me*, and he didn't know Cecilia last night."

"Was Cecilia here last night, Lol?"

"Yes. She only got home late in the afternoon and found my note waiting for her. Ben wouldn't let her have the motor, so she came in a cab. They've left London again this morning. He's like a child with a new toy over that ridiculous car. Cissy doesn't realize how bad father is, and of course Ben doesn't care—any more than you do."

"That's a cruel thing to say," exclaimed Isobel, with tears starting into her eyes.

"I'm judging by your behaviour, Belle. The doctor was astounded at father having got up and worked yesterday morning. He must have a wonderful constitution. Thank heaven my little ones take after him in that way. The doctor says it's pneumonia. He's coming again to-night."

"If I had only known——" began Isobel.

"Ah! It's too late to talk like that," interrupted Laura: "When people run away from home, and leave no address, it's unreasonable to be surprised at any changes they find when they come back."

"You speak as if I'd been away for years, Laura."

"I would rather not discuss that subject yet. Our duty is to devote ourselves to poor father and mother—not that there's anything the matter with *her*—and so I have decided to ignore your extraordinary conduct until the present trouble is off my mind. Mother agrees with me, so does Arthur."

"You always talk mother into agreeing with you," said Isobel, hotly; "And I don't think it has anything to do with Arthur."

Laura walked off to her mother's room, considering this speech too unsisterly to be answered by mere words.

Isobel tapped softly at her father's door and went in.

Aunt Althea was there, looking big and strong in a white dress; usually so busy, she was now sitting very still, her hands folded, her thoughtful face turned towards the bed.

The familiar old parlour was strange in Isobel's eyes, for the table, tools, and materials of the box-maker's work had been moved away. There was a cool green curtain over the window, in place of the heavy red one of all the year round. A few unfinished boxes were on the mantelpiece and a glass jar of fresh cornflowers, as burningly blue as a Devon sea.

Althea rose and clasped Isobel in her arms. It gave the younger woman a feeling of joy, in the midst of her sorrow and anxiety, to rest in her embrace. Althea Roseglade was so indescribably sweet and fresh; a woman of the pure air, redolent of the essence of faint flowers, more lovable with the wide experience of a full life than ever she had been in youth.

She held Isobel's hand as they stood beside the bed, both gazing long and earnestly at the dying man.

Henry Erne was stretched at full length, as Isobel had seen him on the night before she left home, his eyes open, his fingers now and then picking at the edge of the sheet. The convulsive twitching of his limbs, which she had noticed before, was very frequent now.

"Henry, here's your little Belle," said aunt Althea, stooping over him.

He looked at Isobel. She knelt down to bring her face on a level with his. Althea was struck by the resemblance between them, even at such a crisis of silent emotion; they were like the morning and the night of the same stormy day.

"Belle," murmured Henry Erne; then, very slowly and distinctly he repeated the names of his three children:—"Cecilia. Laura. Isobel."

His nervous fingers were at rest for several minutes. He looked and looked into her eyes with a solemnity of expression she had never seen in any face. The veil between this life and the unknown hereafter was as thin as a film of dust.

When he turned his head again on the pillow, once more plucking at the sheet, Isobel rose and sat down by her aunt.

"It has come so suddenly!" she whispered, helplessly; "I haven't noticed any change in him lately. Yesterday he looked the same, and now he is so old, so old."

"My poor Henry!" said Althea.

Her pity was not for the present, but for the past. Isobel remembered the day when she had walked home with her father, after the reading of her grandmother's will.

"You're thinking of him when he was a boy, at your country home, and you were such a wild and happy girl," she said, twining her arm round her aunt's neck.

"Yes, darling."

"He has never been a happy man. I have felt and known it all my life, aunt Althea."

There was a long silence.

"I used to think he didn't care for us in the very least," she went on; "He didn't understand girls. I begin to see we didn't understand him either. If Cissy had been a little more patient, and Laura not so vain of her cleverness, and as for me——"

"There! There! Don't cry, my darling!" whispered Althea; "You've had your happy times together. Dwell upon them. You don't know how your father

has praised you to me. He called you an angel in the house."

"Father said that?" exclaimed Isobel, in amazement.

"Yes, yes, and many other loving words that would surprise you to hear."

* * * * *

The three following days lived in Isobel's memory, for the remainder of her life, as a strange time of isolation.

It was as if the house had been cut off from all associations with the outer world, although neighbours found their way to the door, and the doctor came in with his kind, useless words of hope.

Henry Erne, for the first time since early childhood in his country home, was the centre of interest and affection. They all thought and spoke only of him.

Isobel hardly thought of her adventure with Franklin Osborne; Laura appeared to have forgotten it.

Mrs. Erne talked continually of her grief at the illness of her husband, chiefly to hide the lack of it and salve her conscience. Mr. Starling, depressed by wandering about the house, stole off to visit his son and daughter in Clerkenwell, not sorry for an excuse for a little holiday.

They telegraphed to Cecilia, who had gone with her husband in the new motor to Scotland. Ben Reuben thoroughly disliked his father-in-law and laughed at Cecilia's slight—very slight—anxiety. As he was in a particularly good temper, and inclined to be more generous than usual, she did not want to annoy him by rushing home, especially as she herself had little faith in Laura's alarming bulletins. Old Lol always exaggerated, she said, and what did a strange doctor know of her father's toughness?

* * * * *

The dying hours of Henry Erne were as lonely as his living years. He was too weak to talk, but a stray sentence that occasionally passed his lips showed that his spirit had wandered far from the narrow room where his body lay.

He spoke of the marshes and pastures of his boyhood, of the Kentish woods and hop fields.

Several times he pointed at the empty air and told them his old companions, John and Dick Moreland—his sister Althea had forgotten their names till he repeated them—were standing near and smiling kindly at him. Once he waved his hands and suddenly raised his head from the pillow, an ecstatic expression flashing into his face and his eyes luminous with wonder.

“Oh, father dear!” said Isobel, who happened to be alone with him; “Tell me what you see!”

He gave no answer. The light had died away, the vision gone.

* * * * *

Henry Erne died in the afternoon of the third day after his collapse.

He had been conscious in the early morning. His lips moved, but without sound.

First Laura, and then Isobel, bent down to him and moved a little to the right and left until their faces came within the focus of his dimming eyes. Then he saw them, each in turn, and recognition gleamed through the film—it lifted—one long gaze of farewell—and his earthly eyes were closed forever.

They did not know when he fell asleep, or when the sleep came to an end. His sister Althea was sitting beside the bed, her hand on his wrist. His wife was in her own room, with Laura. Isobel stood in the shade of the green curtains that tempered the brilliance of the July sun.

She looked at Althea, then at her father. There was such a solemn silence that she fancied she could hear him breathing. His face was serene. She believed that his breast was still moving; she thought his eyelids quivered, and then——

“Isobel, it is over,” said Althea, gently lifting her hand from his; “Your father is at rest.”

CHAPTER XVI

A QUARREL

THE drama of daily life in Fossingham Street, Henry Erne having left the stage, was carried on with much agitation and little applause.

The interesting problem of the will had enlivened the Erne family after Chertsey gran'ma's funeral. Although the box-maker left no will, and they did not expect to be remembered in it if he had, several of his relations appeared upon the scene, with the two laudable objects of condoling with the widow and satisfying their curiosity as to "how she took it."

The Reverend Robert sent a picture postcard, representing a very small church and a very big cemetery, with a suitable inscription. Cousin Philip, the actor, wrote an appropriate and pathetic letter, as Laura said, but rather thoughtlessly enclosed a handbill of the farce in which he was touring, with the head-line:—"Why mope? There's a funny side to everything!"

Great-uncle Thomas and his daughter called, bringing great-aunt Thomas's sympathy in the shape of half a dozen new laid eggs from her own fowls. They happened—great-uncle Thomas and his daughter, not the fowls—to meet Althea Roseglade at Fossingham Street. She was greeted with affection; they made the kindest enquiries after Mr. Roseglade's health, and mentioned their little legacy from Chertsey gran'ma as if she had never heard of the will.

Cousin Sophie, having heard a rumour of Henry Erne's death in some unexplained way in her adopted land of Upper Tooting, came to Bayswater to have it confirmed. She was too late for the funeral, but not, like Horatio, for the bak'd meats which coldly furnished forth the three meals she invited herself to share with Mrs. Erne and her daughter Isobel.

Cousin Sophie subsequently declared, in various letters that she wrote to friends and relatives, that poor Henry Erne's little shop and lean house had depressed her spirits. In her own words, she had had "the creeps for a fortnight."

* * * * *

Isobel was quickly made to understand that Mrs. Erne and Laura had only suspended hostilities, as it were, until after her father's death. The armistice had been thorough. Not a word of reproach had passed their lips while it lasted. She vainly hoped that her absence had been, not forgotten, but forgiven. Roseglade's warning enabled her to meet the first attack without surprise.

It was a couple of days after the funeral. Isobel was sitting in her mother's room. Mrs. Erne, propped up as usual on her pillows, looked particularly miserable, with black ribbon bows sewn on her white jacket. Every day she seemed to get stouter and more helpless, all her good looks having long disappeared in avoirdupois.

Laura had said, on the previous night, that she thought it would be as well to talk everything over in an amicable and friendly manner. Mrs. Erne had to decide whether she would leave Fossingham Street, or let the shop. Henry Erne's inheritance from Chertsey gran'ma, added to his small savings, made his widow independent of her children.

Cecilia did not want any of her father's money, and Laura had never expected to get any, so they were not disappointed. Neither of the elder sisters could have endured the thought of living with their mother, but they both took it for granted that Isobel would be perfectly happy to devote her life to Mrs. Erne.

Directly Laura came into the room, on her amicable and friendly mission, she opened hostilities. Isobel had not had time to do more than kiss Miss Dolly, and take off the little girl's hat, before the first shot was fired.

"I hate beating about the bush, so I've made up my mind to discuss your inexplicable and astounding behaviour just before father's death, Belle," said Laura, in a burst.

"You know very well what I'm talking about, don't

you, mother ? ” she went on, before her sister could reply ; “ It doesn’t matter what we say before Dolly. She’s unusually sharp for her age, but no simple little child would understand *this* topic I hope.”

“ Don’t you think it would be wiser to talk about something Dolly does understand ? ” said Isobel, languidly ; “ It’s a July day, and you look so hot already, Laura. Why exert yourself any further ? ”

“ Dolly has brought her little tea service,” continued Mrs. Welwyn, ignoring this speech ; “ If you can have a little drop o’ watey in the jug, pet, and a piece of paper torn up to make bread and cake, you’ll be quite happy and good, won’t you ? ”

Isobel unpacked the doll’s tea service from its flat cardboard box, poured the water and supplied the imaginary bread and cake. Dolly was a fat little miss, appropriately named, being very like a doll with yellow hair and round cheeks. She had a trick of sitting still, when she was alone with grown-up people, and rolling her blue eyes from one face to another. Her mother called it keen observation and her aunt Cecilia delicious ogling.

“ Woses ! ” said Dolly, suddenly pointing to the red blobs on the tea service.

“ Don’t you begin to chatter out loud, sweetheart, for momma and auntie Belle want to have a serious talk,” said Laura ; “ You make your tea and cut some bread and butter. Now, mother and Isobel——”

“ I’d rather play with Dolly,” interrupted Isobel.

“ Don’t be cowardly, my dear. If you never do anything to be ashamed of, you need never be ashamed of anything you do.”

“ Please say that again, Lol ! ” cried Isobel ; “ I haven’t thoroughly grasped it.”

Laura turned in a dignified way to Mrs. Erne, who was falling into a doze.

“ Perhaps you had better tell Isobel, mother, that we all know she didn’t leave London last week with a girl friend, as the note she put on the mantelpiece led us to suppose.”

“ Well, Laura ? ”

“ You might also tell her that we haven’t found it out

by any underhand means, mother," Laura went on, in the same tone; "Mr. Starling's son, George, came to see his father on the same evening. He told us that he had met Isobel, at Waterloo, and seen her with his own eyes go away by train with a man."

"I've heard all this several times already, dear," said Mrs. Erne, stupidly; "Why don't you tell Isobel yourself instead of putting it on to me?"

"Let mother go to sleep, Laura. She isn't at all interested or curious," observed Isobel.

"You mustn't think I'm curious!" said Laura, dignity turning to indignation; "I feel the responsibility of the family on my shoulders, now that poor father is gone. After all, you're the youngest, Cecilia isn't here, and I do claim to know a little more of the world and life than you do, Isobel. You must allow I'm a married woman and the mother of three children—well, practically three," concluded Laura, anticipating a great many months.

"I don't deny anything you say, Lol, but why say it?" said Isobel, wearily.

"To make you remember that you're dealing with a person of some experience," retorted Laura; "Now, by young George's story, if it's correct, I can't imagine who was your companion last week. That's the first important point."

"So you cross-examined George Starling, did you?"

"I hoped to discover it was some old friend, or perhaps a relative."

"Laura! Surely you don't think I would elope with great-uncle Thomas or the Rev Bob!"

"You may think that's funny, Isobel, but I do not. What you have said only confirms my secret fear."

"What is your secret fear—great-uncle Thomas or the parson, Lol?"

Laura treated the question with the silent contempt it deserved.

"To put it in a single word, Isobel—I have always been afraid of the consequences of your complete indifference to the rules of society, for I hesitate to say the laws of right and wrong."

"Rather a strong, lengthy word, Laura," said Isobel, drily.

"I've often noticed a peculiar laxity in serious matters," continued Mrs. Welwyn; "You never seemed to care, after you were grown up, whether aunt Althea was legally married or not. You went about with that Joe Hesketh as if you were engaged, and you may recollect that I had to warn you about encouraging young Starling years ago."

"Well, Laura?" said Isobel, for the second time.

Laura was beginning to feel irritable, but she concealed it fairly successfully.

"In one way, for I want to be strictly just, I don't blame you," she continued; "If mother—it's all right, she won't hear me, she's asleep—if mother hadn't allowed you to go off for an indefinite visit to an unknown man who happened to come into the shop——"

"Do you mean Mr. Godfrey Strang?" interrupted Isobel, with a sudden flash in her hitherto quiet eyes.

"Of course I do, if that was the name."

"If you knew anything about the world beyond your own street, or read anything except cookery books, you wouldn't call him an unknown man, Laura."

"Never mind about that. Some of these literary geniuses are no better than other people. Very often they're worse. They must be, to write all the unpleasant things they do. However, that isn't the point. Mother and father let you stop at his house for weeks and weeks. What did they know of his private character? Father declared that he judged him by his work, so he told me when I once tackled him on the subject. But by what Arthur says—for we *have* got a few volumes in our house besides cookery books—this Godfrey Strang has some very strange notions indeed."

"Has he shocked poor Arthur?"

"No, for Arthur's a man himself and they look at moral and social questions differently from right-minded women, even the best of them."

"What an old fashioned and contemptible opinion you have of men, Laura."

"I've no objection to be old fashioned in upholding

virtue, Isobel. It's better than being new fashioned in *your* way, my dear."

"Don't call me your dear when you're speaking so unkindly. What's the matter with you, Lol? What do you mean by my new fashioned way?"

"Running away from your home with a stranger, when you knew your father was dying, and stopping alone with him all night. There! You asked for the truth and you've got it."

Laura rose to her feet, instinctively drawing back after her dagger thrust. She saw the blood leap to her sister's face, flood it from forehead to neck, and then rush back to the wounded heart, leaving her as white as death. She had struck home—no need for a second stab.

"Isobel——" she breathed, half in fear, half in appeal.

Isobel locked her hands together, swaying a little, with proud, set lips and drawn up to her full height. She had often stood like that, speechless and shaking, when she was a child and too angry for words.

They looked at each other for a full minute, both regardless of the heavy breathing of their mother in the bed and the aimless talk of the child at play.

Laura was the first to drop her eyes, but there was no other change in her face. She was conscious of great righteousness and it sustained her courage. When Isobel spoke at last—not before the silence was almost unbearable to the other woman—it was in a low voice of self-control.

"I had no idea that father was dying you can be very cruel, Laura Cissy and I knew that when we were little as for what you say about me and——" she stopped, determined not to speak Osborne's name—"You can believe what you choose——"

"Then you refuse to defend yourself, because you can't!" cried Laura, with a strange, fierce joy in striking again.

"It would be no use to defend my conduct to you, Laura, for you have already judged me unheard. You've killed something in me that will never come back to life. What is it?"—she pondered, frowning darkly for a few

seconds—"My love? My reliance on you? I don't know. Good-bye, Laura."

"Does that mean you want to turn me out of the house?" asked Laura, stooping to pull her frightened little girl to her feet.

"No. Oh, no. I was saying good-bye to our old affection. It will never be the same again."

There was another pause, brief and breathless, as they stared at each other. The child began to cry, looking down at her scattered toys.

"Have you talked to Cissy, and aunt Althea, and everybody else about me?" asked Isobel.

"No, only to Arthur. I have no secrets from him."

"Oh, well, he must understand by this time how you exaggerate and pervert the truth," rejoined Isobel, bitterly.

"So my husband knows I'm a liar, does he?" said Laura, all the pleasant lines of her face distorted by rage; "That's the last straw, Isobel—I've done with you! . . . Come, my darling, come home with mamma——"

The tension of the scene was broken by the miserable wailing of the child, mingled with the complaints of Mrs. Erne, who had been lying awake for some time, too frightened to interfere.

It was impossible for Laura to sweep out of the room with Dolly in her arms, as she intended, for she could not go without the child's hat, her own cloak, and the box of china. Her common sense, and the fact that Dolly had struggled away to cling to Isobel, obliged her to give up the idea of immediate departure never to return.

Mrs. Erne became hysterical. She had little self-control, like many lazy and equable people, during her rare bursts of temper.

There had been times, in their childhood, when her girls had been frightened nearly out of their wits and flown before her, while her husband had been obliged to use physical force to restrain her violence.

The phase had ended, however, when Cecilia was too old to be cowed, having rapidly grown into a strong, spirited girl, well able to fight her own battles and protect

the other two. Of late years, Mrs. Erne had indulged in tears instead of blows, wild laughter instead of shrieking.

There was no reason for an outburst on this particular day, except that she was agitated by the quarrel between her daughters and worried over her money affairs. Both Laura and Isobel were obliged to console and rebuke her by turns, while Dolly was hurried out of the room into the care of Mr. Starling, who had come back from Clerkenwell and was again at work on his side of the little shop.

Mrs. Erne sobbed, tried to faint, threw herself back on her pillows, struggled, plucked at her hair, and was thoroughly exhausted before her daughters could make her be quiet. Then there was the usual business of recovery to be gone through, with the accompaniment of sips of brandy, fanning, whiffs of smelling salts, self-reproaches, and adroit flattery.

Laura and Isobel were at one in their thorough dislike of such a scene. Their hands did not touch as they tended her. They did not look at each other. It was difficult to say whether Laura was more anxious to escape, or Isobel to have her go. Laura would not have stopped to tea, if it had not been for Mrs. Erne's threat of further tears. She did not offer to go downstairs, to her sister's relief, but sat by her mother's side, pretending to listen attentively to all the grievances she knew so well. Dolly's presence helped them through the next half hour, for they could both talk to the child, ignoring each other.

There was none of her usual cheerful bustle in Laura's departure.

She looked pale and morose. Mrs. Erne bade her a lingering good-bye, whispering audibly that she was so much more sympathetic than Belle—come again soon—don't forget to remind dear Arthur about that bottle of claret he had half promised to send—and so on and so on.

Laura took Dolly's hand, directly they were outside her mother's room, and walked quickly downstairs without saying a word to her sister following them. She opened the door herself and waited while the little girl kissed Isobel, then she seized the child's hand again,

glanced up and down the street, and went away, smiling and talking to Dolly.

Isobel made no attempt to call her back. She quietly shut the door, chatted for a few minutes with Mr. Starling, who happened to come out of the shop as she went upstairs, and so returned to her mother's room.

* * * * *

Joe Hesketh went to see Isobel in the evening. He had just heard of the death of Henry Erne from the Roseglades.

It was a long time since she had seen her old lover. Although he seemed to look upon the loss of her father as a mere trifle, mentioned once and forgotten, she found a certain pleasure in his kind, commonplace talk. He was friendly and intimate, and he knew nothing of her flight with Franklin Osborne.

Isobel thought that Joe had changed. He was fast losing the boyish look and manner which had so attracted aunt Althea, and, in a lesser degree, Isobel herself.

She wondered whether he still cared for her, comparing him with Osborne. Who could tell? She had trusted and admired Osborne. She trusted and liked Hesketh. The one had failed her utterly. What did she really know of the other's life? Nothing.

They were alone together for only a few minutes. Then, in her aching need of help and sympathy, she told him of her quarrel with Laura; not a word of the cause.

He looked troubled, but all the time she was speaking his eyes shifted from her forehead to her throat, from her mouth to her hair.

"Joe, you're not listening to a word I say!" she exclaimed at last.

"No! No," he answered, quietly, with a pause between the repeated word; "I've been thinking all the time of the change in your face since I first met you. You're sad and worn and I know you're feeling old. Belle, why don't you come to me? I love you just the same as ever——"

"Stop! I don't want to listen to-night. Come again after a little while. Not to-night, Joe! I can only think of Laura——"

"Oh, what does that matter?" he said, with the rough indifference to her confidence which had so often repelled her; "What does a quarrel with a woman matter? Write to her—make it up—when shall I come, darling?"

"I'll send you a letter. Don't come till you hear from me. I'm sorry I told you about my sister. You don't understand what it means to us both—Joe, I don't want you to stop any longer now. Be kind to me. Do as I wish. Good-bye."

"Well—good-bye."

* * * * *

Isobel walked restlessly up and down her own room, for some time, trying to be calm and telling herself the unhappy day was already vanishing into the past.

She could not forget Laura's face or stabbing voice. It was as if a glaring light had been suddenly thrown upon her sister, showing all the unsuspected cruelty of her hidden nature, depths she herself did not realize; seen perhaps only a few times during a placid, well-satisfied life.

A hundred recollections of old tenderness rushed over Isobel. They seemed to be written on the very walls of the room—Laura brushing and brushing her gleaming hair at the oval mirror on the chest of drawers; Laura in a long cotton nightdress kneeling beside her bed saying her prayers, serious and devout, but listening to every word the other girls whispered; Laura arguing with Cissy, her bare arms akimbo, looking like a strong, bloomy peasant girl in her short petticoat and plain, tight-fitting bodice; Laura on winter nights, when Isobel was a child, taking the little chilly thing into her own bed to nestle into warmth and sleep; Laura on her wedding day, a vision of youth in triumph, turning round laughingly at the door to kiss her hand in a glad good-bye to the dear, shabby, familiar room.

All the pictures of the past faded away, blurred and spoiled by the recollection of a hard and fierce woman whom Isobel could hardly recognize as Laura—Laura who had insulted her, parted without a word, left her like a stranger standing on the threshold of their old home.

Isobel threw herself down upon her bed, no longer feeling the wild emotion of youth, but with a sense of desolation and regret that was too deep for tears, sweeping her into the great ocean of life's bitter experience that ebbs and flows, unseen, through the whole of humanity.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FAILURE OF LAURA'S JUDICIOUS PRESSURE.

"I EXPECT to spend the rest of my life, Belle, tearing about the country in a motor car, with the occasional relaxation—in bad weather of course—of sitting for hours at the side of the road when the thing breaks down," said Mrs. Reuben to her sister.

"Why don't you let Ben go by himself, Cissy?" asked Isobel.

"Oh, my dear, do you think such a pair of married lovers could be happy apart?" said Cecilia; "You wouldn't dream of suggesting to Laura that she might go to the Isle of Wight next month without Arthur."

Isobel laughed a little ruefully. Cecilia knew of her quarrel with Laura, but not the details.

"So I shall be off again to-morrow," Cecilia went on; "I am to be left, with Norman and the luggage, at my sister-in-law's house while Ben comes back to London to wind up his business affairs."

"Are you glad he is retiring at such an early age?" said Isobel.

"Comparatively early, Belle. Dear Benjamin is not in the heyday of youth, you know. I'm glad he is rich enough to retire. He hasn't so big an income as his partner, but the gallant Dubosc means to take an active share in the business as long as he can dance to the office. They've turned it into a limited company and Mr. Dubosc is the managing director."

"Then I suppose Ben will still hold shares?"

"Probably, but I can't say. I've never taken any interest in wine, except to drink it when I'm in the mood."

"Don't you want to know where all your money comes from, Cissy?"

"Not in the very least. If I did, Ben wouldn't tell

me. When he grumbles at my bills—just as he used to do when we lived in that pokey old house in Hampstead—I always make the excuse that I'm ignorant of his means. I tell him that if he would confide in me, of course I should keep within bounds. It's amusing to see how he is torn between his love of secrecy and his desire to check my extravagance. We go through the same little farce at irregular intervals. There's one thing to be thankful for, he never interferes with Norman and that's all I really care about."

She rose and paced the length of the big drawing room, stopping here and there to move an ornament an inch to the right or left, or to touch the sweet-peas that looked like a cloud of butterflies hovering over the glass and silver vases.

The Reubens' house in Temple Street, near enough to Hyde Park for those important words to be added to its address, was as fine and extravagant in appearance as its mistress.

Cecilia's old neighbours at Hampstead had disappeared from her calling list almost as entirely as the Bohemians she had known in still earlier days. Her new friends were chosen from among the rich and successful, the men in city businesses, the women fond of pleasure. They entertained one another with big dinners, played Bridge, and were possessed, at this time, with a mania for motoring, playing with their cars as spoilt children play with new toys, the sooner one is broken, the sooner another will be bought.

Isobel watched her sister with all her old admiration. Cecilia had passed through many phases in a few short years, but she was still young and handsome enough to suggest the summer of life. She was clothed less showily than of yore, had grown temperate in jewels, and learned to appreciate the brilliance of her own complexion without paint or even powder.

Cecilia suddenly knelt down upon the floor, and put her arms round Isobel in her old effusive way.

"Tell me all about it, Belle!" she pleaded, cheek pressed to cheek; "I know that you ran away with some strange man and left the poor devil in a few hours. Laura tried to make me believe all sorts of nonsense. I laughed

at her. I'm sure you wouldn't hide the truth from your own Cissy. What was his name, dearest? Whisper!"

"Please don't ask me, Cissy," said Isobel, afraid to meet Cecilia's keen eyes; "I have sworn to myself never to tell anyone in the world. Don't ask me!"

"Mystery on mystery!" cried Cecilia, half gaily, half seriously pulling away the hands Isobel clasped over her face; "You never loved him, Belle, or you couldn't have left him. Did he frighten you? What happened? You know you can trust me. Whisper, Belle."

"No! No! No!"

Cecilia's voice and face changed. She became a little anxious and more earnest.

"I never thought you would refuse to tell me anything if I begged and prayed you as I do now. Think again, Belle. I should understand. I'm different from Laura. I should understand and sympathize whatever you told me. Don't shut me out when you're unhappy, darling."

She held Isobel more closely still and began to tremble.

"Let me pay back a little of the debt I owe you!" she said so softly that the other could hardly hear; "You can tell me—as I told you—everything. Whatever you have done, or thought, or escaped, or suffered—dearest! Cissy will understand."

Isobel did not speak. No voice she had ever heard, or shelter she had ever known, expressed so much selfless love and pity. Was it possible that this lovely flower of compassion could have grown from the bitter root of Cecilia's secret history?

Isobel yearned to tell her, but never faltered for a moment in the resolution to be silent. No suspicion of the truth dawned upon Cecilia. She had not seen Franklin Osborne since the terrible night of their parting. He had ceased to haunt her waking thoughts. The passion she had known, akin as such passion always is to love and hate, lived in her memory as a thing apart from all other experiences.

As there was a hidden baseness at the heart of Laura, or she could never have suspected the purity of a woman like Isobel, so there was a hidden magnanimity at the heart of Cecilia, or she could never have tried to forget and forgive Osborne.

"So you can't tell me? I'm never to know the story of your strange elopement?" said Cecilia, at last, with a sigh, as she rose from kneeling at her sister's side.

"Never, Cissy. I dare to say that to you. It would make Laura very angry."

"Oh, write to Laura, or go to see her, make it up!" said Cecilia, unconsciously repeating Joe Hesketh's advice.

"I would go half the way gladly, but I'm afraid I shouldn't meet her when I got there, Cissy. I wish you were not going out of town just now. Can't you come back with Ben in a few days?"

"No, he will be absorbed in his business and I should be considered in the way. Besides, I should want to bring Norman, and it might offend my sister-in-law if we all rushed off again directly after we arrived. Oh, here's my own darling! Doesn't he grow quickly, Belle? Look at his eyes! They sparkle like diamonds. I'd throw away all my diamonds—and you know I adore them!—for one of my boy's glances."

The sudden change in her voice, from indifference to her relations to proud pleasure in her child, was caused by the appearance of the ill-named Norman, as much of a Jew as his father, but with something of his mother's brightness of colouring and expression. Not an attractive boy, little Norman Reuben; too sharp, too selfish; too much aware of his own importance.

He submitted to Isobel's kiss, as it gave him an opportunity to drag a little bunch of roses she had bought on her way to Temple Street out of her belt.

"Oh, Norman dear! You mustn't snatch auntie Belle's pretty flowers!" exclaimed his mother; "Give them back to her at once. Please, my angel!"

The angel took no notice, but amused himself by sniffing them until his nose was pricked by a thorn, when he pulled them to pieces and scattered the petals on the floor.

"He's so destructive," said Cecilia, as if it was one of his good points; "Would you like to walk to the omnibus with auntie Belle, when she goes away, and buy her another bunch of roses if mother gives you the money?"

"No, I'd rather spend some of it on sweets and put the rest inside my pussy," answered Norman.

"He doesn't mean his Persian kitten," said Cecilia, seeing that Isobel looked alarmed; "It's a money box in the shape of a cat. Norman is a true Reuben in the handling of his money, Belle. He spends half on himself and hoards the other half. You never buy mother any presents, do you, darling?"

"No, I don't. You've got your own money," replied the sweet boy.

Cecilia's love was indeed blind when she looked at her child. She felt that he was the one possession of her own, her very own, the compensation for marriage with a man whom she barely tolerated, at times abhorred—the only link between them that was not selfish on his part and mercenary on hers. They both loved the child, too young as yet to cause any serious quarrel between them regarding his treatment. He was a clever boy and already played them off against each other to his own advantage.

The entrance of Norman prevented any further private talk between the sisters, or talk of any kind, for tea was brought in directly afterwards.

"Do you mind, dear, if we don't say very much to each other for the next half hour?" asked Cecilia, when the servant had left the room.

"Not at all—but why?" asked Isobel.

"Well, the fact is, Norman doesn't like to have any conversation going on while he is at tea, so I humour him, as it's better for his digestion not to be annoyed during his meals."

So they ate in silence until Norman, having finished, was graciously pleased to push away his plate and allow the ladies to do as they liked.

Cecilia embraced Isobel many times at parting.

Isobel was intensely grateful, looking into the fond, untroubled eyes of her sister, that Osborne's name had not been spoken. She had known a minute of temptation, but it had passed and there was no shadow between them.

* * * * *

If Frank in Osborne had loved Isobel in the same way as he had loved her sister, the fire she had lighted

in his heart would have flamed for a little while and burnt out. He was deeply injured by her desertion, refusing to believe for a minute there was any reason behind it but caprice, or distrust of his good faith.

He had expected to find her in Fossingham Street, when he returned to London by the last train, on the eventful day of their flight. A few words with Mr. Starling, whom he saw outside the shop, shattered his hopes. She had not gone home. Her father was seriously ill. Both her sisters were in the house.

Osborne could do nothing but seek his own flat, storm half the night, and calm himself as well as he could with the poor consolation of self-pity.

By the following evening he had found out that Mr. Erne was dying, Althea Roseglade nursing him, Mr. and Mrs. Reuben had left London, and, most important of all, Isobel had returned. While he chafed at the necessary scheming to keep informed of the events in the Erne household, Osborne was satisfied with his success. He did not write to Isobel, although he hoped and believed that she was longing to hear from him.

It was not until a week after the death of Henry Erne that Osborne took the amazing step of visiting Laura Welwyn, and boldly proclaiming that he was the hero of Isobel's adventure.

At first he had thought of approaching Mrs. Erne, but Mr. Starling's description of her feeble condition was discouraging. His second thought turned to the Roseglades, but they had left London directly the funeral was over. According to Mr. Starling—the chief source of information—Laura was managing the family affairs in Fossingham Street, her mother and younger sister being entirely under her influence.

The Welwyns were living in South Kensington. Old Mrs. Welwyn still shared their house. It was such a long time since she had submitted to be ruled by her daughter-in-law that they had nearly forgotten the original struggle. Laura, being used to it, was no longer anxious to assert herself as mistress of the house; Mrs. Welwyn, also being used to it, was grateful for her officious kindness, and really played second fiddle remarkably well for an old lady with a dull ear for domestic harmony.

Franklin Osborne paid his first call in the afternoon. He wanted to see Laura alone, hoping to make her his partisan before meeting her husband.

He did not know that Laura had quarrelled with Isobel, but was not unprepared for the severity of her attitude towards them both. Laura did not spare him. Perhaps she was glad of an opportunity to vent her temper on a deserving—or rather an undeserving—object. It certainly did her good.

She positively glowed with the pleasing consciousness of representing virtue to a penitent and decidedly good-looking man. She was loyal to Isobel in that she did not openly criticize her conduct, but implied that he only (as far as she knew) was to blame.

Osborne listened with patience and humility, appearing to be so impressed by Mrs. Arthur Welwyn's moral sentiments that she began to be a little sorry for him. It was not until she had said—several times over—all that she felt it her duty to say that he offered to tell her everything she cared to know.

He would lay his life before her like an open book, said Osborne, and her clear eyes should examine the white pages of an unhappy man's love for her gentle sister. So he opened the book and read her suitable extracts, carefully edited and blue-penciled.

Laura was greatly touched by his description of Isobel's extraordinary disappearance from Sterry, at the very minute when he was going to take her to his own sister's house, followed by the cruelty of her silence. She agreed with him that a solemn engagement of marriage could not be broken so lightly. They were pledged to each other; he was unswervingly faithful and refused to be cast off without a reason.

Laura reproached herself for injustice. Her still smouldering anger against Isobel made her pity the ill-used lover. She was inclined to think he was too good for the foolish girl.

Osborne was a skilful flatterer, and, being in earnest, persuasive and plausible enough to win the confidence of a much more astute woman than Laura. She liked him and thought he had been treated most unfairly. Added to this, there was a masterful strain in her character

that made her long to subdue Isobel and force a confession of her error.

Her rule of conduct for her children, "You must do exactly as I command and you'll always be happy" expressed her strongest belief in life.

"I shouldn't dream of coercing Isobel, even if I had the power, but I do believe in judicious pressure being brought to bear upon her for her own good," said Laura.

She was so well pleased with the phrase that it was repeated several times, between Osborne's departure in the afternoon and return in the evening, to her husband and mother-in-law. Arthur Welwyn was a little doubtful of the wisdom of inviting a stranger to pay two visits in the same day.

"He is so anxious to know you, dear, and you can't tell Mr. Osborne exactly a stranger when he's engaged to Isobel," exclaimed Laura.

"Was, not is," observed Arthur Welwyn.

"She has never officially broken it off. She ran away with him to be married."

"True, but since then she ran away from him not to be married, Lol."

"It would be an excellent thing for her, dear," said Laura, ignoring the point; "Franklin Osborne is obviously a well bred, well connected man with plenty of money. Of course I don't quite see what we could do with mother if Belle left home. I really couldn't ask her to live with us, it would be too big an undertaking to have an invalid perpetually in our spare room."

"Or anywhere else—impossible!" said Arthur, in an emphatic parenthesis.

"—And I'm afraid Cecilia wouldn't like to pack her into their house. We should have to think out a plan. I dare say it could be managed very well at Isobel's with a little ingenuity," she concluded, as if her mother was an awkward-shaped piece of furniture.

"You'd better wait until Isobel has got a house, my dear," said her husband.

"Oh, that will be all right, as I said before. We shall only have to use a little judicious pressure."

Franklin Osborne followed up his success with Mrs.

Welwyn by an appeal to Mrs. Erne. Laura introduced him, seizing the opportunity of her sister's absence on a visit to great-uncle and aunt Thomas.

Although Mrs. Erne depended upon Isobel more and more as the years passed, and was always receiving presents from Cecilia, Laura was her favourite daughter. She agreed with Lol in great things and small. So when she was told that Isobel ought to marry Mr. Osborne it struck her as a very happy idea. He was agreeably sympathetic, and very much in earnest.

Laura told her enough of the elopement to make her indignant with Isobel, lenient to Osborne. It was not difficult to persuade the poor lady that her own future comfort depended on Isobel accepting a rich man.

"You know how poorly you are left, mother," said Laura; "Cissy can't afford to add regularly to your income, because Ben is so close-fisted, and it's impossible for Arthur and me, with our little ones to educate. Now if Belle is a sensible girl she can give you a room in her house. She will have plenty of money, and I know Franklin Osborne has taken a fancy to you, so he won't be an object. He told me so."

"I've always detested Fossingham Street," said Mrs. Erne.

When Isobel came home in the evening, a little weary and weary after a day's pleasure with her relations, she was dumfounded by the news that Osborne had been there.

Mrs. Erne was loud in his praises. He had left the house only half an hour before Isobel returned, bound for the Welwyns to dinner.

"You might have told me you were engaged, Belle," said Mrs. Erne, when she had described the delightful afternoon.

"I'm not engaged, mother," said Isobel, decidedly.

"My dear! Have you asked Mr. Osborne to break it off, or written to him?"

Isobel was obliged to answer "no."

"Then you can't blame him for expecting you to keep your word," said her mother, who had been carefully coached on this point by Laura; "He says you have no reason for changing your mind so quickly."

"Except the best of all reasons that it *is* changed, mother."

"He claims the right of an accepted lover to lay his case before the family, Belle."

"He has evidently done so to-day, mother, so there's an end of it."

"Laura and I both agreed with him that inconstancy, without cause, is simply despicable."

"An excellent sentiment."

"How you contradict!" cried Mrs. Erne, pettishly; "One would think the man came as an enemy instead of a devoted lover. If you have anything serious to say against him, why don't you tell me what it is?"

"I have no love for him, mother, no affection, no liking——"

"How absurd! It's less than a month since you cared for him well enough to run away from home to be married. You're behaving like a silly, changeable girl of fifteen. I won't talk to you any more. Get my supper, do! The subject's closed. I wash my hands of it."

Unfortunately Mrs. Erne did nothing of the kind. She returned to it again and again, with all the persistence of an obstinate, narrow-minded, ill woman.

Isobel listened, answered mildly, and tried in vain to divert her attention. Her mother's last word at night and first in the morning was in praise of Franklin Osborne.

Laura appeared upon the following afternoon.

There had been no reconciliation between the sisters, but they had agreed without words to meet and talk before others in the usual way. They both felt the effort and constraint, although Laura would never have confessed it.

Her intention, as explained to Arthur, was to begin the judicious pressure by an appeal to Isobel's better nature. As she generously remarked, we all have a better nature, even the lowest and worst of us.

If it had not been for the quarrel, which made her a little afraid of Laura, Isobel could have held her own. But she entered the wordy war with unhealed wounds. Laura enjoyed it. She had set her heart on victory,

firmly believing in her own wisdom, and looking forward to the happy day when everybody concerned would acknowledge that she was right.

* * * * *

Argument and appeal, sarcasm and pathos ; Laura's quiet, dogged determination ; Mrs. Erne's tears and entreaties ; Osborne's pursuit by word and letter—Isobel was subjected to all this at a time when her health, spirits, and courage were at their worst. She never wavered in mind, but her active resistance seemed to be at breaking point.

She would have written to Edward or Althea Roseglad for help had she known their address. She could not write to Cecilia. If Laura or her mother had sent letters to Cissy—but the former was too busy and the latter too lazy—the well kept secret of her lover's name must have been revealed.

To her surprise and confusion, when the struggle had been going on for seven days, Ben Reuben unexpectedly appeared.

It was months since he had visited Fossingham Street. A whim brought him, little knowing that he would be called upon to play an important part in the last scene of the Osborne-Isobel drama.

Reuben reported that Cecilia and the boy were safe at his sister's house, after a journey in the car at record speed. He had that day finished the business with his partner, dined at his club, and, having failed to get a good seat for his favourite musical comedy, taken a cab to Bayswater, remembering Cissy's many reproaches at his neglect of her family.

He found Laura, her husband, and Isobel sitting in Mrs. Erne's room. Although "Ben" was considered purse-proud by the Welwyns, and most unsympathetic by his mother-in-law, they all received him graciously.

Reuben, when he chose, could assume a very pleasant cordial manner. He was in an amiable temper, beaming, self-satisfied, successful.

It was not very long before his shrewdness detected a certain nervousness in Isobel, and forced cheerfulness

Laura, which made him suspect a family disturbance. He had evidently interrupted a discussion, judging by the awkward silence following his entrance and words of greeting. He glanced questioningly with raised eyebrows at Arthur Welwyn, but Arthur had one of those regular, mildly good-looking faces that rarely change in expression, and he met his brother-in-law's eyes without any answering gleam.

"I can't see any reason for not speaking quite frankly before Ben," said Laura, so abruptly that Ben started and stared at her; "He represents Cecilia, and I'm sure he has the interests of the family at heart, even if he doesn't come to see us as often as we should like. I wish you wouldn't frown at me, Isobel. I believe in open, honest speech."

"So do I, Laura," said Reuben, promptly; "Were you talking over the family interests when I came in? If so, and I can be of any assistance——"

"Laura and mother were discussing my private affairs," Isobel interrupted, coldly; "I really don't think that you and Arthur need trouble yourselves about them."

"My dear girl, you should say pleasure, not trouble yourselves!" exclaimed Reuben, turning his liquid, bloodshot eyes inquisitively on her face.

"I'm sure I don't want to interfere, Belle, but Lol says you have nobody else to depend on," added Welwyn.

Isobel tried to look unconcernedly at Reuben, but there was a certain intimate, bold admiration in his face that made her think of the night of the burned letters. She was angry with herself for changing colour. He laughed a little and shifted his glance to her sister.

"We reply upon you for the open, honest speech again, Laura," he said.

"Well, you must know that there is a particularly nice man called Franklin Osborne," she began.

Isobel's heart seemed to leap in her breast. She hardly dared to look at Cecilia's husband when that name was spoken, but he was wholly unconscious of the reason of her terror, although the expression that flashed across her face was not lost upon him.

Then Laura described Osborne, with many flattering and friendly epithets; sketched the elopement; Isobel's strange desertion of her lover; return home, and stubborn refusal to give a reason for her extraordinary conduct.

Mrs. Erne accompanied the story with audible sighs, murmurs, and repetitions of Laura's strongest adjectives. Arthur, with his hands in his pockets, his long legs out-stretched and his head thrown back, stared at the ceiling and looked, as he felt, very uncomfortable.

Reuben sat with his gaze fixed on Isobel, quite at his ease, with one of his hands continually passing over and over his chin and mouth, plucking gently at his lips with a thumb and first finger, and smoothing his sallow cheeks.

The situation amused him vastly. He thought that Isobel was an amazingly deep little hypocrite, wondering whether this Franklin Osborne was the secret lover who had written the compromising letter she had snatched out of his hand. He repeated the words in his mind. They confirmed his low opinion of the majority of women—not an impetuous, honest woman like his own wife—but women who fooled other men and looked as innocent as Isobel. Cecilia had refused to discuss her sister with him, on the day which followed the eventful night of his discovery, but Cecilia (he knew) was absolutely unsuspecting, with all her faults.

Although Isobel could not fathom his thoughts, nor fully realize the meaning he attached to the letter which she had never read, it was impossible for her to meet his eyes unconsciously.

She held Cecilia's secret and his honour in her hands. She knew that Franklin Osborne, whom he began to defend as her ill-used, faithful lover, was the man who had desecrated Reuben's home and shamed his wife.

Isobel had risen to fetch her mother's fan towards the end of Laura's long speech. This trifling incident made her stand before them like a prisoner at the bar. She rested her hands on the back of her chair. Her head drooped. She was utterly spent and weary.

Laura thought she was too sullen to answer. Reuben was as interested as a man at a play, with the advantage

taking a share in the dialogue, uncertain as to how the tense scene would end. Mrs. Erne and Arthur Melwyn became mere onlookers, anxious and ignored.

"I should like to ask Isobel one question on my own account," said Reuben, the smooth hand still busy on his face, the liquid eyes very keen and cunning.

She turned her head towards him.

"Have you known this poor fellow, Osborne, for a long time, Belle?"

"No, not for a long time."

"A couple of years?"

"No."

Reuben stooped forward and waited until she looked at him.

"Are you sure you didn't meet Osborne more than a couple of years ago? I mean, meet him for the first time. Perhaps he was a mere acquaintance. Perhaps a few letters passed between you?"

"No."

She did not evade his insolent, daring challenge any longer, but looked at him steadily. Reuben knew he was on dangerous ground, but his blood quickened with excitement and cruelty.

"Come, my dear Isobel, why won't you tell me the truth?" he said, in a soft voice, making the others think he was only jesting; "I believe you knew this man when you were much younger and not half so pretty as you are to-day. Hasn't he been faithful? Can't you give the poor devil his reward?"

He paused again, beginning to admire her unwavering glance, but resolved to make the little hypocrite confess his power.

"I may be quite wrong," he went on, in the same low, mocking voice; "Perhaps you won't marry Osborne because you remember somebody else too well, eh? What if Cissy has told me all about it—I don't say she has—and I repeat the pretty little romance to Laura and her husband and your dear mother? Shall I? What about the little love letters? Shall I? Silence gives consent! Then I will."

He threw himself back in his chair and turned to Laura, who was eager with curiosity. It was so cleverly done

that Isobel believed he meant to betray the words of the damning letter.

A wave of contempt for him, and scorn of her own cowardice, swept over her.

Why should these people try to rule her life? She suddenly longed for freedom and escape. An inspiration flashed into her mind. It attracted and captivated her fancy by its very daring. Reuben must be stopped at any cost. She was reckless and at bay.

"Laura!" she cried; "Listen to me, not to Ben. I can't keep my promise to Franklin Osborne because I love, and I'm going to marry, another man."

Isobel had not misjudged the instant effect of her shot. It struck Reuben into blank silence; it astounded her sister; it turned Arthur Welwyn's studied indifference into frank interest, and it even brought a momentary glow into her mother's pale face.

Laura was the first to recover from her surprise.

"Isobel! Who is it?" she gasped.

"I think you know already," said Isobel, calmly; "Of course it is Joe Hesketh."

* * * * *

Although Ben Reuben had been the loudest in his congratulations, pretending to have guessed Isobel's news before she told it, he was more puzzled and curious than ever.

He did not suspect Hesketh for a minute of having written the fatal letter. Joe was not the type of man. He knew "old Joe." Poor old Joe, thought Reuben, caught by a pair of dark eyes and a prude's solemn smile.

Isobel had effectually stopped his amusement. The game was at an end and he knew no more of her secret than when it began. It made him feel bored and disappointed.

So he discovered that it was getting late, bade the Welwyns and Mrs. Erne a hasty good-bye, and successfully manœuvred for Isobel to see him off.

He praised Joe Hesketh as they went downstairs, but when they were in the passage he quickly laid his hand on Isobel's arm, holding it tightly, while he looked at

her with the old expression of impertinent admiration.

"You don't think I meant to tell about—that letter I read by accident years ago?" he said in a low voice.

Isobel tried in vain to free herself. They were alone and she meant to show him her contempt. He laughed and pulled her a little nearer.

"Why, Belle," he whispered, "No man with a grain of decency would give away a woman's secret. I was only having a game with you. You can trust your old brother Ben to hold his tongue, can't you, dear?"

Isobel was furious at his words, his grasp, his hot breath on her cheek, the insult in his eyes.

She opened her lips to give him the lie—to free herself forever from his vile suspicion—when she thought of Cissy. She had promised Cissy never to betray her . . . she felt Cissy's arms round her neck and Cissy's wild heart beating against her own. . . .

What did it matter if this man thought she was guilty of a secret sin? What did it matter if everyone else in her little world believed it? The loyalty of her love for Cissy was like a bright star shining in the dark places of her soul, and self, in its pure light, was forgotten.

Isobel's face changed with the exultation of her thought. She looked at Reuben, no longer fiercely or fearfully, but with so gentle and pleading an expression that he instinctively drew back and let her go, feeling for a minute, although he could not have given a reason, ashamed of his base suspicions.

"I trust you, Ben, never to speak of that letter again to anyone, not even Cecilia. Try to forget it for *my* sake. Will you? I beg you——" she said.

"Yes, Isobel. I've always been sorry for you, and I'm glad you've confided in me at last," he answered; "I give you my word, dear."

He bent forward and kissed her. She did not shrink from him, but quietly opened the door, bade him good-night and returned his smile—a little smile of patronizing pity—as he went away.

Shame and humiliation are hard to bear, even for the sake of one whom we love, but Isobel felt no regret.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW JOE HESKETH HEARD THE NEWS OF ISOBEL'S ENGAGEMENT

It seemed to Isobel Erne, after serious reflection, that it was her trying duty—or happy privilege—to tell her old lover, Joe Hesketh, the astounding use she had made of his name in an emergency.

She had no uncertainty as to his reception of the news. He would take it as a decided, if eccentric, way of accepting him at last. Isobel began to believe that all her life, since their first meeting, had shaped itself to this end.

Looking backward, she felt as if only three events marked the passing of her girlhood. The first was the bright month at Lulwater, clear cut as a jewel in her memory. The second was the night when she discovered Cecilia's secret, everything which had to do with it, before and after, being coloured by its baleful influence on her thoughts and heart. The third was her meeting, as the first of all the meetings that followed, with Joe Hesketh.

The experience with Osborne had warped her mind, making her look upon loving a man too well as dangerous and cruel. Cecilia had loved passionately and touched the depths of despair. Laura was incapable of such emotion and was always happy and at peace.

Isobel was still young and the prospect of an unchanged life in Fossingham Street, as her fretful mother's nurse, both frightened and enraged her. She saw herself, in imagination, growing grey and old, while Mrs. Erne, Starling, and even the neighbours remained the same. She went to the length of picturing her own death, wondering whether Laura or Cissy would fetch away her mother and if they would divide the old collection of her father's boxes between them.

The works of Hesketh and Drake, Box Makers, were in Little Orb Street, City, a stone's throw from the overcrowded Cambridge Road, with Mile End Road, which never seems to end when a man's tramping it, and old Green Street, with nothing green about it, less than half a mile on either hand.

Isobel found her way to Little Orb Street, travelling through a part of London she had never seen before, with the help of a constable's directions, the advice of an old man who had overheard her enquiries—"Go round the corner by the third public 'ouse, you can't miss it, and ask agin"—and the officious assistance of a small boy with such a big parcel on his shoulders that he looked like an infant Atlas.

Once in Little Orb Street there was no difficulty in finding Hesketh and Drake, as the name of the firm was blazoned across the whole of the buildings on one side of the way.

Isobel picked out a door marked "Office." It admitted her to a narrow, dark passage, where a large man was sitting in such a little box, with "Enquiries" painted on the window, that he might have been used as an advertisement for an exact fit.

Isobel asked for Mr. Joseph Hesketh. When the large man had stared at her long enough to satisfy his curiosity, he said Mr. Joseph was engaged—"Yes, he is, but he doesn't know it!" thought Isobel—unless it was something urgent.

"It is very urgent," she replied; "I'm sure he will see me if you can let him know I am here."

She had no card, but the door-keeper gave her a slip of paper, and, when she had written her name, read it over, approved, and told a passing youth, with a pen behind his ear and a cigarette between his lips, to find Mr. Joseph and tell him "Miss Herne" was waiting.

The speed of the youth's return, compared with the slowness of his departure, suggested a sharp order from the young governor. He took Isobel out of the dark passage, through a big room where clerks and typists were at work, and tapped at a door with Joe's name painted upon it.

"Come in! Come in! Ah, Miss Erne! How d'you

do ? You needn't wait, Mathews—do sit down, Miss Erne. I'm very glad to see you—Belle ! ”

Thus Joe Hesketh, waiting until he was sure Mathews was out of hearing before he really greeted her.

Isobel felt a little thrill of delight when she saw the pleasure and surprise in his face. He looked well, but different in the old suit he was wearing from when he called at Fossingham Street ; his hair was rough and his hands dirty. A stranger could well have mistaken him for one of the workman.

She noticed all the details of his appearance in the first few minutes ; also that his room was cheerless, untidy and dull, with no gleam of colour except in a big case of specimens of rare woods. The desk was a confusion of papers ; the only pictures on the walls were a photograph of the interior of the works and a coloured print of Lord Kitchener. The dingy window overlooked a yard where all the débris of the place seemed, to her unaccustomed eyes, to be thrown into heaps.

Isobel was more embarrassed than she had expected. Well as she knew Joe, and sure as she felt of his unchanged attitude towards herself, it became more difficult every minute to tell him the reason of her visit. She was annoyed with herself for hesitating. If she meant to marry the man, it should have been easy to say anything to him. He was kind and talkative as usual, but rather abstracted.

It did not occur to Isobel, remembering her father's desultory way of working, that Joe was very busy. So she was surprised and a little chagrined when he rose quickly from his chair and held out his hand, with the evident intention to say good-bye.

“ I'm sorry, Belle, but you've hit upon an hour in the day that I really can't spare. Look here ! D'you mind waiting by yourself for a little while ? I'll get off as early as I possibly can and we'll go out to dinner somewhere.”

“ I can't wait, Joe, for I promised mother not to be late. Joe ! I came to tell you some news—about myself—can you spare me five minutes more ? ”

“ Of course I can. What is it ? ”

He sat down again. There was a pause.

"I—I don't know how to tell you. You are so prompt and practical and business-like!" said Isobel, plaintively.

"You have yourself to blame for that, dear," replied Hesketh; "I always try to be strictly sensible and unsentimental in our friendly conversations."

"How you treasure up and repeat my irritable speeches, Joe."

"Nonsense! What do you want to tell me?"

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Isobel became desperate.

"Laura and Arthur and Ben Reuben were at our house the other night," she began quickly; "And they treated me very cruelly and I was very angry with them. We were all disagreeable together."

"Oh, well, if you held your own in the row, there's nothing to worry about. What else?"

Another pause.

"It ended——" she went on, very slowly.

"Yes?" said Joe, with a second glance at the clock.

"It ended in my telling them—they were so curious about my affairs—telling them I was engaged to be married, Joe."

Surprise flashed into Hesketh's face, followed by an expression of such blank dismay that Isobel was distressed.

"It wasn't the truth, Joe—at least, I'm not sure whether it was the truth."

"You're not sure?" he repeated, in a puzzled tone; "What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean—he doesn't know it," said Isobel, feebly.

"Are you speaking of Reuben or Arthur Welwyn?"

"No! No! How dull you are! I'm speaking of the man himself—the man I told them I was going to marry."

Hesketh stared at her for a minute. Then he rose, pushing his chair noisily back.

"I can't make it out, Belle. Why don't you speak plainly? She'll drive me crazy, this girl!" he exclaimed, addressing the four walls; "First she looks tragic, then she blushes, then she begins to laugh. I can't see the joke."

"It's not a joke. Don't you want to know my lover's name?" said Isobel.

"I suppose I do—if you came here to tell me—what is it?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No. Why—Isobel——"

She suddenly stooped forward and took his right hand, pressing it closely and warmly in both of her own.

Hesketh pulled her to her feet, and so they stood looking at each other, it seemed to Isobel for a long time.

"You mean it, Belle? Truth now——"

"Yes, truth! I've been very unhappy. I'm so lonely—I don't know whether I care for you even now, but I do mean it"

Clasped in Hesketh's arms, his lips whispering close to her own, overwhelmed with the first expression of a man's fervent love, Isobel was conscious of the joy that sprang from elementary emotion.

Her elusive beauty seemed to develop in an hour, as if she bloomed at the first breath of summer heat. She looked at her old lover with new eyes. She thought she loved him.

They were both happy, intensely happy. Hesketh was looking towards the future. Isobel was living in the delight and illusion of the present hour.

CHAPTER XIX

THREE YEARS AFTER. A TALK AND A RETROSPECT

"I'm not vindictive, Cissy, but I feel I shall never really make it up with Isobel," said Laura Welwyn.

"But it's such a long time since you had your quarrel, my dear. Surely you can forget all the unkind things she said, or you said yourself," urged Cecilia.

"I have forgotten them on principle, except that she accused me of falsehood and exaggeration. I also recollect that I said I'd done with her. I know it's strong, but that was the exact expression I used, Cissy. 'I've done with you!' I said."

"You went to her wedding and gave them a present."

"Only a salad bowl. You know Isobel doesn't care about salad—except tomatoes that she takes in her fingers, in a most vulgar way, between meals—and I've heard Joe say that he feels like a rabbit when he eats lettuce and green stuff like that."

"Then I do think it was a little vindictive to give them a salad bowl, wasn't it, Lol?"

"Arthur thought it was a beautiful present. He went with me to choose it. He has such good taste. I'm always satisfied with any new clothes for myself or the children if he says they're all right."

The two sisters were sitting in the garden of Mrs. Reuben's seaside house in Hampshire. Norman was at boarding school. The four youngest Welwyns, with their nurse, were down on the beach, so Laura and Cecilia had had a long, quiet chat. The former had enjoyed herself very much; the latter looked more than a little bored and weary. She had made several attempts at a change of scene, but Laura was too comfortable to move. Unfortunately Lol, energetic as ever with her hands and tongue, was becoming seriously attached to easy chairs, big dinners, and slow movements.

She looked like a pink, over-blown rose, nodding her head to emphasize her remarks as the flower nodded in a breeze.

Cecilia was more restless than of yore. She amazed Laura by playing tennis, bathing, and motoring all through the summer. It was the first time that Cecilia had passed a whole day alone with her sister. The Welwyns were paying her a month's visit.

"Of course I've no complaint to make of Isobel since her marriage," Laura went on; "It was very good of her to find a home for mother. Arthur and I have so many expenses, besides keeping old Mrs. Welwyn."

"Old Mrs. Welwyn has an income of her own, hasn't she?" asked Cecilia, knowing that this remark was an indirect reproach for not having taken Mrs. Erne herself.

"I wasn't so much thinking of money, dear, as of the responsibility and trouble. Arthur and I felt we couldn't have two elderly ladies in our house. One is quite enough for any small family."

"Oh, Lol, you speak as if they were pianos or dining room tables!" exclaimed Cecilia, laughing.

"At the same time, I don't consider that Isobel really adapts herself to married life," continued Laura, going back to the main point; "At first she was like a little girl with a new doll's house, but now she seems tired of it. It's lucky for her Joe isn't a really quiet, domesticated man, like Arthur. How different the three of them are from one another! Have you ever thought of that, Cissy?"

"The three of them? Do you mean our husbands?"

"Yes. Arthur's so wrapped up in home life. He often says there are only two things he cares to live for—his family and the G.P.O., and I do believe that neither of them could get on without him. Now, Joe Hesketh likes business, but he takes much more interest in his club, and politics, and all sorts of things of no real importance. I don't know how to describe your Ben—" Laura looked thoughtfully at Ben's wife—"He doesn't care about sport, or literature, or art, or religion——"

Cecilia burst out laughing.

"Even motoring, now the novelty has gone off, seems to have lost its fascination for him," Laura went on;

"You can't call him exactly a home bird, can you?"

"No, he's of decidedly migratory habits," replied Cecilia, with a peculiar smile.

"I suppose you'd class him as a financier since he gave up wine," said Laura, who was always inquisitive about Ben Reuben's affairs.

"He gave up his partnership in the firm of Reuben and Dubosc, my dear, he has never given up wine," answered Cecilia, coolly.

"I can't bear Mr. Dubosc!" exclaimed her sister.

"Why can't you bear the gallant Dubosc, Lol? He's always very friendly to you."

"Because I've no patience with a man who dyes his moustache, and kisses ladies' hands, and laughs at serious subjects. He might as well be a foreigner."

"When have you heard Mr. Dubosc laugh at serious subjects, Laura? He's a Roman Catholic, and very devout. He never misses going to Mass on Sunday."

"Well, Arthur and I never miss going to church, except when we're having our holidays," retorted Laura: "I've often wondered why you invite Mr. Dubosc to all your parties. I know that he makes himself very agreeable, but his conversation seems trifling to me. Then he's so unpatriotic."

"Is he, Lol?"

"Haven't you noticed it? He's always making game of the English, although his own mother was an Englishwoman and married a Frenchman. He said two such stupid things, although Ben laughed at them, when he was spending the week-end here. It was before you came down in the morning."

"Did he?"

"Yes. He said English people believed that having eggs and bacon for breakfast was ordained by Providence, as an article of Faith, at the beginning of the Christian Era. Then I was talking of the difficulty of getting good servants now-a-days, and he said it was the fault of the mistresses who insisted upon domestic service resembling Divine Service, which meant perpetual hymns of praise and confessions of wrong-doing were to be offered by the lower orders to those above them."

"Isn't there a grain of truth in that, Lol?"

"No. Look at my nurse! She's been with me, as you know, since Dolly was a baby and she was a mere child herself. I've trained her and treated her kindly, and I believe she'd go through fire and water for any of us," said Laura, who had a gift for missing the point of a story or a question; "I don't believe that girl would leave me to marry a marquis."

"A marquis isn't very likely to propose to her, Lol, but you'd better take care if an eligible young baker comes along, or there is a good-looking policeman on duty near the house."

"I wouldn't stand in her light if she had a good offer," said Laura; "I've told her that. 'Milly Price,' I said to her very solemnly only last Christmas, 'If ever you want to be married, and they say the plainest and most unattractive girls get one chance in their lives, you must tell me frankly all about it. Then I'll see the young man, and if I think you'd really be bettering yourself I'll give my consent, and I'm sure Mr. Welwyn will make you both a handsome present.'"

"Hasn't she any parents to look after her, Laura?"

"Oh, my dear, there are still half a dozen of them at home."

"Half a dozen parents, Lol?"

"No, I mean brothers and sisters. Don't be silly, dear. Her father and mother are most respectable people. I'm sure they'd be willing for her to marry anybody I recommended."

"You and I were not over anxious for our parents' approval when we chose to be engaged, Lol, were we?"

Laura could not help smiling.

"Poor father was so unfitted to manage daughters, and we took mother's measure before we were in our teens," she said; "It seems to me we've turned out remarkably well, Cissy, when you consider all the other members of the Erne family. I made the same observation to aunt Althea the other day and she agreed with me. She said we were like three ears of corn among the tares. It was such a pretty way of putting it."

"So you think we have turned out remarkably well, Lol? I wonder!" murmured Cecilia.

"I was speaking of you and myself, Cissy. I really

don't know about Isobel. She's so secretive and aloof. Talk about my exaggeration!" exclaimed Laura, returning to her old grievance; "It's nothing compared to her own. I was at their house, last year, when that well-known man died—what was his name? He wrote books."

"His name was Strang, Godfrey Strang," said Cecilia.

"Yes, it slipped my memory for a minute. Well, you know, Isobel hadn't seen him since she was about fifteen, but she turned as white as chalk when Joe read it out of the evening paper. I thought she was going to drop, and when I caught hold of her hand she was as cold as ice. Joe hadn't noticed her, but I was really frightened. She looked terrible and hurried out of the room by herself. I ran upstairs a little time afterwards, but her door was locked and she wouldn't let me in. If *that* isn't ridiculous exaggeration——! After all, Godfrey Strang was a mere stranger. I should have forgotten about him years and years ago. Wouldn't you?"

"Probably I should, but little Belle is very different from you and me, Laura."

* * * * *

Isobel Hesketh was spending the long days of a hot summer in London.

Cecilia had invited her at the same time as the Welwyns, or whenever she chose to go. But her husband could not go out of town until September, and he did not want her to leave him.

The Heskeths lived in one of the up-to-date houses built on the old wilderness of a garden close to Fossingham Street. The stone wall had been taken down first of all, then the trees, and finally the ancient mansion in the centre. A wide road had been made across the land and the buildings on either side called by the name of Bayswater Court.

No. 14 Fossingham Street stood where it did when Mr. Erne and Mr. Starling shared the shop between them, but some of the other houses had been altered and enlarged.

The dangerous corner where an old crossing-sweeper, nicknamed Mrs. Cherry by the Erne children, had sat upon her stool as self-appointed director of the traffic, disappeared with the stone wall. Both Mrs. Cherry and her husband, who had once sold groundsel and chickweed in Westbourne Grove, had left this world for a place where, it is to be hoped, there are no muddy crossings to sweep nor caged birds to feed. Their daughter, formerly in the kittle-'older line of business, was united to an itinerant musician, described in her circle of friends as "a man with an accordion and a good 'eart."

Mr. Starling had retired, not into solitude and silence in his grey hairs, but to his married daughter's home in a noisy side street in Clerkenwell.

Young George Starling had been obliged to give up his employment as a watch-maker, having nearly sacrificed his eyesight in over-fine work, and was now engaged behind the counter by his old firm. Young George had not relinquished a vague hope of winning Miss Is'bel until she was married. He had now settled down, in his sister's words, to be a reg'lar o' bachelor, looking upon life with rather sad eyes through his huge spectacles.

Joe Hesketh had leased a house overlooking the road through Bayswater Court in front, and Fossingham Street at the back.

It was a daily gratification to Mrs. Erne to gaze out of her bedroom window into the narrow by-way she had detested for so many years. Most people, in the circumstances, would have tried to forget its existence, but she was never tired of watching her old neighbours and their successors at work, at the doors, or running out into the road to buy fruit, vegetables, or fish from passing hawkers.

She frequently pitied the inhabitants of Fossingham Street, and wondered how the poor creatures managed to live in such a miserable place, so near, yet so far, from the higher sphere of Bayswater Court.

* * * * *

Isobel sat in her room, alone, on the day when Cecilia and Laura were talking about her in the Reubens' garden.

It was a mere slip of a room, her very own; a little oblong room that looked as if it had wandered into the house by accident, while it was being built, and found itself unable to escape, being wedged in between the end of the drawing room and the staircase.

Isobel's three pictures were there, a rosewood writing desk which Cecilia had given her for a wedding present, a couple of chairs, her little old book-shelf from home, a bracket for holding a vase of flowers, and several of her father's boxes.

Joe was represented in the room by a framed photograph taken by Althea Roseglade, in the old days when she had called him "her sober 'and," in the garden of Heron House.

Laura had been rather hurt that a big portrait of herself and family—art crayon, enlarged from small negative, one guinea—had not been hung near the sketch of Cissy, until she recollected that it would be seen more often in its place on the drawing room mantelpiece.

A retrospect of the three years of her married life slowly passed through Isobel's mind. Some of her recollections were so vivid that they appeared to her inner vision like a series of bright pictures, while others were clouded and already half forgotten.

Her short engagement was so strange to recall that it seemed as unreal, and far away from ordinary days, as the dream of one who had been enchanted.

She saw herself as another being, who only resembled Isobel Hesketh in physical form; a girl in love with love, agitated, tremulous, too excited to be happy, too ignorant to understand her own emotion or the passionate, but self-controlled, nature of her lover.

The day of her first meeting with Cecilia, after Ben Reuben had casually told his wife the name of Isobel's rejected suitor, flashed into her memory with a feeling of stormy sunshine, brilliance and darkness together.

She had gone to Cecilia's house in the evening, hoping to find her alone. There were several guests in the drawing room when she entered. Cecilia came across the floor to meet her, smiling and with both hands out-stretched. Her manner was affected and too demonstrative. She did not kiss Isobel, barely touching her cheek with her tinted lips.

The only other woman in the room suspected that the handsome Mrs. Reuben was envious of her younger sister, for some unaccountable reason, and trying to hide it. Mr. Dubosc, observant as gallant, thought that they had quarrelled. Ben Reuben compared his sister-in-law with his wife and congratulated himself, as he often did on such occasions, on having chosen not only the beauty of the Erne family, but the one who would wear the best.

It was not until the visitors had gone, and Ben had stretched himself, yawned, and finally lounged out of the room, that the sisters were alone.

Then Cecilia, her finger on her lip as a warning to be silent until Reuben was out of hearing, had dropped the mask and looked at Isobel with wonder, pain and fierce jealousy battling in her face. She pulled the girl close, with the violence of the night of the burned letters.

"Is it true?" she gasped; "Oh God! Have we both loved—did he treat you—as he treated——"

"No, I left him of my own accord," said Isobel, helpless and frightened in her grip; "I never loved him. Listen, Cissy, listen!"

Cecilia had thrown her off and was pacing up and down the room, struggling to be calm.

Isobel stood still, watching and waiting patiently. Then she told the true story of her flight with Franklin Osborne, his unconscious betrayal of the secret and how she had left him. Long before it was finished Cecilia was as quiet as her sister.

When the soft, whispering voice ceased and Isobel timidly raised her eyes—she had not dared to look at Cecilia till all was told—she saw the wonder, the pain and jealousy were gone.

"So you ran after me down the road and I didn't hear you?" said Cecilia.

"Yes, Cissy."

"And you tried to hide his name for my sake? Would you have married him—some day—knowing what you know?"

"Never, never, Cissy! Even if I had loved him with all my heart—never, Cissy."

"Belle, next to my boy you're dearer to me than anybody else in the world. I swear, if you hadn't found

out the truth, or become Franklin's wife before I could tell you, I wouldn't have opened my lips afterwards. I'd have met him, and pretended I hadn't seen him before, and been loyal to *you* till I died."

She suddenly pressed her hands together with a wild, appealing gesture.

"I haven't prayed for years, Belle, but I thank God—I thank my God for saving you, darling—darling——"

* * * *

Isobel's retrospect passed on to the day of her marriage. She smiled to think of the mingled excitement, and joy, and absurdity of it all.

She saw the big, empty, city church ; Arthur and Laura supernaturally solemn ; Cecilia being mistaken for the bride ; Ben Reuben congratulating her with his most offensive air of brother-in-lawly affection ; the youngest Welwyn's curiosity to see everything causing him to tumble head-first into the pew in front ; Messrs. Drake and Hesketh, of Little Orb Street, represented by relatives at the ceremony and fancy boxes in the list of presents ; the breakfast at a showy restaurant ; the white and colossal presence of Mrs. Erne stretched on an invalid's chair ; the merry scene of good-bye and showers of confetti—so one picture after another grew out of the past and faded away.

The important figure in them all, now prominent, now in the background, was the man whom she had known so well and so little—Joe Hesketh.

Isobel tried to disentangle her first impressions of Joe on their honeymoon. An impossible task ! They were all interwoven, the bright threads and the dark, like the very skein which the Fates had woven to draw them together.

Her memory was a confusion of hours with him and minutes alone ; the light laughter of youth ; love-making as of old, but fraught with new, passionate meaning ; bewildered amazement at this stranger—this stranger—being her husband ; pride in his love for her, even stronger than his love of himself.

When did she discover the incomparable beauty of

autumn, glowing and burning from the ripe earth to the topmost branches of the trees, made no appeal to Joe? Perhaps it was on the day when a gusty, roaring wind drove the russet and red leaves along the road and over the hedges, and Joe, refusing to go out, sat before the fire he had ordered to be lighted, smoking till the air was blue.

When did she find out that her bridegroom did not care for books? That was most certainly on the evening when she offered to read aloud from one of the farewell gifts of Godfrey Strang on her last day at Lulwater. Joe professed to be delighted—and fell asleep before she had turned half a dozen pages.

How did she learn that he could be jealous and sullen? By his silence and neglect for a whole afternoon, because she had talked for an hour with a most entertaining man whom Joe himself had introduced to her.

Suddenly she heard the echo of gay talk and the dear sound of mirth, dispelling the pictures shadowed by disillusion, as she thought of Joe in his happy moods.

He was always kind and nearly always good tempered. He chafed a little at enforced idleness before the moon had begun to wane, which was hard for her to bear, although she herself was looking forward, perhaps a little too eagerly, to the return to London and the excitement of possessing a home of her own.

That was the immeasurable difference between them—the bride would never have confessed to weariness, the bridegroom mentioned it every day.

* * * * *

Isobel's reverie was abruptly ended by the sound of a whistled signal from downstairs. It was Joe, who announced himself in this way when he came home from business.

She did not jump up and run to the door as a young wife should always do—Laura had informed her—at the approach of the master of the house. He had whistled twice more before she strolled to meet him. By that time he had reached the landing outside her room.

"Ah, there you are!" exclaimed Joe; "I thought you were out again."

His voice sounded pleasant, although the last word, "again," struck her as unnecessary. It chilled her greeting.

"I told you I would make a point of being here in future when you came in," said Isobel.

She turned into the drawing room and he followed her.

"Yes, it's cheerful to be met with a jolly laugh and a budget of news, after a hard day's work, my angel!" said Joe.

Isobel could not help laughing. She put her hand round his neck for a moment and kissed him.

"Tired, dear?" she asked.

"Yes—no—not particularly. I've had rather a worrying day. The gov'nor and I have had about enough of Phil Drake's tomfoolery I can tell you."

Joe went to the window and leaned one shoulder against the wall, crushing the silk curtains as his wife silently observed, as he stared out, and flicked the blind tassel quite viciously against the glass. Phil Drake was the son of the original Drake of the firm, who had recently died leaving his affairs in the weak, incapable hands of a mere boy.

"Surely you can get rid of Phil, as you and your father both think he is ruining the business, Joe," said Isobel.

She had heard so much of Phil Drake's iniquities that she positively hated his name.

"My dear, one can't give a partner a week's notice to quit, as if he was an office boy."

"I know that, Joe, but can't you manage it—somehow? I should think it would be easy for your father to——"

"If you'll be so good as to come down to Little Orb Street to-morrow, and show us how to put everything right, we shall be very grateful."

"Don't be so disagreeable, Joe."

He made an impatient little click with his tongue, dropped the tassel, and, to her great relief, moved away from the silk curtains.

"I suppose it's impossible to get a cup of tea in this house after four o'clock?"

"I think I should ring the bell and ask for it," replied

Isobel, taking up an evening paper he had thrown on a chair and beginning to read.

Joe ordered tea. He walked up and down the length of the drawing room, till it came, his hands in his pockets, his expression thoughtful, and frowning.

"Have you had your tea, Belle?" he said, glancing at the tray which the servant had put upon a table by the open window.

"Yes, thank you, an hour ago. Shall I pour out?"

"Don't bother. I'll do it."

Not a word was spoken until he had drunk three or four cups of tea and eaten all the thin bread and butter and cake. It seemed to make him more cheerful. He rose, dropped into another chair close to Isobel, and lighted a cigarette.

"I hadn't time for anything of a lunch. Father and I were trying to hammer a little sense into that fool's head all the morning. It's as empty as any of the boxes in the works . . . Well, how have you been getting on, darling? I say! Isn't that your new dress? No, it isn't. Is it?"

"Of course it is. I wondered when you would take any notice of me."

Isobel smiled at him a little reproachfully. She had lately developed an interest in clothes. It was a pretty dress, coral pink, so well designed and cut that it made her look tall and gave a warmth of colour to her delicate face and slender throat.

"I like it all right," said Joe; "But wouldn't it be an improvement to brighten it up a little? I should have some flowers, or bows, or something. It seems so plain and severe to me, but I expect I'm wrong. You've done your hair a new way, haven't you? It makes you look more like Cecilia."

As he gazed at her from the depths of his low chair, critically and admiringly, their eyes met. Isobel's expression changed and her face flushed. She sat down beside him again and smiled—not reproachfully this time, but self-consciously, happily. He went on looking at her, smiling too.

"Quite sure this time?" said Joe.

"Oh, you know I am."

"Well, I'm glad. It'll give you something interesting to do, and perhaps your sister Laura will leave off lecturing you about the desolation of a childless home—I should say, lecturing both of us, for of course she means you to repeat her words of wisdom to me."

Hesketh lighted another cigarette, and then laughed.

"If we can kick out Phil Drake, the guv'nor may change the name of the firm to Hesketh and Son. How would it be to call ourselves Hesketh, Son and Grandson? But if it's a girl—well, Hesketh, Son and Granddaughter would be a little too original for the trade to recognize."

He laughed again, got to his feet and strolled to the door, after picking up the paper which Isobel had laid aside.

"I think I'll go downstairs, it's so hot in this room. Why don't you make them pull down the blinds at mid-day?"

He had opened the door and nearly gone before she called to him in a quick, agitated voice:—

"Joe!"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Is that all you're going to say to me?"

Hesketh looked puzzled.

"All?" he repeated; "What do you mean—about Phil Drake and the business?"

"No! No!" said Isobel; "About the future—my baby——"

She could not go on, for his questioning, wholly unmoved expression made her shrink within herself and filled her with a great wonder.

"Darling! Of course I'm glad, if that's what you want me to say. I told you so, weeks past," said Hesketh, tenderly; "Come on downstairs with me. Don't stop here moping by yourself. I want to read you a bit in the paper about an old box of crystal and lapis. It was sold at Sotherby's yesterday and fetched an enormous sum."

He drew her hand through his arm.

"Why, you're crying!" he exclaimed; "I haven't seen you cry for years. Now I come to think of it, I don't believe I've ever seen you cry. Yes, I have though."

It was when we had our first row on the honeymoon. I kissed all the tears away—didn't I?—like this!"

* * * * *

It was at such rare minutes as these, when he was unspeakably gentle and fond, that Isobel forgot—or didn't care—that she had married such an ordinary, blunt, uninteresting man as Joe Hesketh.

CHAPTER XX

EBB AND FLOW OF ISOBEL'S MARRIED LIFE.

THE advent of Isobel's first child found her ready for happiness, eager for new experience.

Always in hope of having a girl, she had chosen her sister's name, Cecilia. When it turned out to be a son, she called him Godfrey to herself from the first hour.

Her husband did not formally suggest Joseph, for he took it for granted that would be her choice of a name.

"Why are you so anxious to have another 'Joe' in the family?" asked Isobel; "There are two already, Mr. Hesketh and yourself."

"That's just the reason we ought to have it, Belle. What made you think of Godfrey? I'm sure my father will expect his first grandchild to be named after himself."

He looked at the sleeping baby for a minute with amused interest.

"You'll say I'm stupidly sentimental, darling," he went on; "But I can't help thinking of the day when this little bald-head is the third Joseph at the head of our old firm."

"Is he to be condemned from his very cradle to box-making in Little Orb Street?" sighed Isobel.

"Oh, no, my dear, bad as things may look at present," said Joe, cheerfully; "I hope we shall have moved into much bigger premises before this small tinker comes into the business."

He paused a minute and then lifted the long, dark plait of his wife's hair, holding it caressingly in his hand. Perhaps it was the only fanciful thing Joe ever said when he told Isobel there was the faintest and loveliest perfume, and richest colour, hidden in her hair.

"I really think we must settle on 'Joseph,' Belle. I like to please my father, especially as he's worried over

the business just now, and besides—though I wouldn't say it to anybody but you—the dear old boy's beginning to run a bit rusty and we can't afford to risk offending him."

"Would he cut you off with a shilling, Joe?" asked Isobel, with a smile.

"I don't know that it would be as bad as that," said Joe; "but he's more likely to be generous to a grandson bearing his own name."

"Such tiny feet to be waiting for dead men's shoes!" murmured Isobel; then she added, wearily:—"It shall be as you wish, dear."

"After all, Godfrey isn't a family name with the Erne people. It was just a fancy of your own, wasn't it, darling?" asked her husband.

"That's all, Joe. It doesn't matter."

* * * * *

The first year of her baby's life was a time of great happiness for Isobel, only shadowed by the growing irritability of her husband over his business troubles.

She sympathized with him and tried, in his absence, to feel the interest and anxiety that she expressed so well in his presence. It was not easy, for she had grown accustomed since her marriage to the possession and spending of money, and he never suggested any alteration in their way of living. But this was not the sole, or the greatest, reason for her indifference to the very real difficulties which confronted Hesketh and Drake at this perilous time in the firm's history.

She was absorbed in the child, and, like many wives of rich business men, suffered from the lack of responsibility and weakness caused by her husband's attitude towards women. He never allowed her to "interfere" when all was going well, but instantly looked for sympathy and understanding, in spite of her real ignorance of his affairs, directly there was a turn of the wheel of Fortune in the wrong direction.

Isobel thought he was satisfied with her questions, agreement in all he said, and the promptness with which she echoed his severe criticism of Phil Drake's mismanagement.

One night, when Joe had been talking and she had been listening as usual, Isobel was intensely surprised by a sudden change in his face and manner. He leaned back in his chair and looked at her long and questioningly—the thought passed through her mind, like a stranger—and then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away. Not a word had been spoken, but she felt as if he had thrown her off in a minute of danger.

"My dear Joe! Why did you look at me so cruelly?" cried Isobel.

"I can't tell you—I don't know. I didn't mean to be cruel," he answered.

"That isn't true!" she said, with an unusual flash of anger; "What were you thinking about me just now?"

"I tell you I don't know. I'm not able to analyze and describe my thoughts and feelings like a woman."

Isobel was silent for a minute. The events of the past few days raced through her mind, as she tried to remember anything she had done to offend him. There was nothing—nothing.

"Do tell me what you were thinking, Joe," she persisted.

"All right. It came into my head that you and I are about as unfitted to each other as—what shall I say?—well, the majority of married people."

"Joe!"

"Don't be hurt, darling. You must remember that the majority are happy enough, just as jolly and happy, as somebody said, after a few years as if they'd never been married at all."

"I try to please you in every way. I thought I had succeeded," said Isobel, bitterly.

"Don't 'try' so much, but 'want' to a little more."

"You're not sensitive enough to know that your speech is very unjust, Joe. I do want to make you happy. How long is it since you were so very anxious to marry me? Nearly four years!"

Isobel looked at him with fine contempt. It struck her, not the first time, that he was greatly changed, so much older in appearance, heavy, obstinate. But even as the critical thoughts gathered and darkened in her mind, he suddenly laughed and she liked him again.

"Now, you won't be so curious next time," said Joe; "I know it's only four years since I gave you all my worldly goods—poor old girl!—and I'd marry you again to-morrow if we could put the clock back. Would you have me?"

"I—I suppose I should," replied his wife, half smiling; "if you knew your Shakespeare, Joe, I'd remind you of an appropriate quotation, that experience 'makes us rather bear those ills we have, than fly to others that we know not of.'"

"Not a bit appropriate!" he exclaimed; "if I'd seen you for the first time to-day, Belle, I'd be willing to marry you at once, or if I'd lived with you for twenty years, I'd jump at the chance of another twenty. Yet, I don't know that I'm ever quite so happy as I expect to be. It's a devil of a mystery, ain't it?"

They both laughed, and he took up the subject of Hesketh and Drake's business where he had left it off.

It was a long time before Isobel forgot one of his sentences:—"Don't 'try' so much, but 'want' to a little more."

By mere accident—or was it intuition?—he had hit the subtle difference between the free gift of love and the conscientious effort of duty.

Joseph Hesketh, junior, was a strong, sturdy boy from the first. To quote his aunt Laura, "one of those children born to be a handful." Isobel found that he filled both her hands with work, as he filled her heart with joy.

Cecilia pitied her for being unable to afford a nurse. Cissy's own boy, for all her devotion, had been left to the care of other people from the day she engaged his first Nana, who brooked no interference from a presumptuous mother, till he was given into the hands of his first boarding school master.

Isobel's baby was called "the Junior" by old Mr. Hesketh, at their first meeting, and the name clung. He became "the Junior" to all his friends, and will probably remain "the Junior" when he is actually the senior in the still existing firm—no longer to be found in Little Orb Street—known as Hesketh and Son, Box Makers.

Mrs. Erne took it very ill, although Isobel did not

glect her mother, that such a probability as a baby would have appeared in her house in Bayswater Court. He always called it her house, looking upon Joe and her daughter as permanent guests.

She was gracious to them as a rule, but did not hesitate to show her preference for Laura and Arthur Welwyn. He Hesketh was so unsympathetic, frequently forgetting to make any enquiries about her health in his hasty, aggressively cheerful visits to her room.

Even Ben Reuben showed more consideration, on the rare occasions when she saw him. He usually recommended her to see a specialist, or have an operation, or go to California, or any other absurdity that came into his head, accepted by the poor, silly lady as serious advice, to say nothing of the handsome gift of port and poultry with which Mr. Reuben characteristically recalled to her mind the principal Christian Festival of the year.

(Cecilia said that when he had made out their list of smaller Christmas presents, after relatives and Jewish friends had been ticked off, Ben simplified the matter by choosing by the frequent repetition of an original couplet :—

“ Oh, damn !
Send a ham. ”)

Mrs. Erne approved of Laura's children, only seeing them for short visits fresh from their mother's lectures on goodness, but she could not tolerate “ the Junior. ” Everybody else liked him, for he smiled and made friends at once, performing the usual little tricks of babyhood with fascinating self-possession.

Time passed too quickly with Isobel in the company of her son.

Almost before she was accustomed to his utter helplessness, he was learning to stand alone ; his crows and gurgles changed so rapidly into Early English. He had reached his second birthday just at the right time to meet, with great indifference and no surprise, the appearance of a little sister.

* * * * *

“ Belle, I'm afraid I must tell you some bad news,”

said Hesketh, several weeks after the birth of the second child.

She did not look surprised or anxious, as he had expected.

"The fact is, my dear, things have gone from bad to worse at Little Orb Street. I determined to keep it from you till you were all right again."

"That was kind and considerate, Joe, but I guessed the crash had come," replied Isobel.

"Don't put it like that!" he exclaimed, angrily then, in a milder tone:—"We've managed to get rid of Phil Drake at last, but things are in such a bad way that I almost wish he'd got rid of us instead. I'm chiefly to blame, for I've left too much in the Guv'nor's hands. He's just as keen as ever, but he's lost his grip."

"All the trade's going badly. Several firms have shut down altogether. We hadn't much trouble during the Strike in the spring, but of course we were hit indirectly. In short, Belle, it's come to this, can we weather the storm?"

"Do you mean personally—you and I, dear?"

"A great deal depends upon us. Father's all right. What I want to do is to put every pound I can scrape together into the business—I must if I'm to hold on. Don't think I'm scared about the future, Belle. People will always want boxes and somebody's got to make 'em. It's just the present hour that worries me. See what I mean, darling?"

He clasped his broad, sinewy fingers round his wife's frail hand. For years she had endured his vague hints at failure and fits of irritation, but he honestly believed he had spared her all anxiety until this day.

"I think you mean we must cut down our expenses at once," said Isobel; "Of course I'll do my part. How soon can we give up this big place, Joe?"

"Good Lord! You're a woman in a thousand!" cried her husband; "I was going to lead up to that by degrees. I thought you might faint, or cry, or go in a rage. I hate the idea, upon my soul I do, for your sake, Belle."

"Have you forgotten Fossingham Street?" said

Isobel, quietly ; " Do you think I'm afraid of poverty ? We'll pretend we're only just married and starting to fight the world for the first time together."

" That idea doesn't appeal to me, darling," said Hesketh, sadly ; " I'd like to be able to give you everything you want and never let you hear the words ' business' or ' work.' "

" That means you would shut me out of the greatest interests of your life, Joe."

" Well, I've spared you all the worries, and only told you the successful thiugs up to now, haven't I ? "

Isobel was tempted to be too candid, but the loving pride of his expression checked the words upon her tongue.

" Of course you have, dear, but I want to hear the troubles too in future."

" Well, we'll see about that ! " said Hesketh ; " I'm glad I've got a family to look after, or I should feel inclined to chuck the whole concern. Your father was a wise man, Belle, to make his own boxes and ignore competition. A wise, wise man ! "

" Why don't you give up the works, if you really think that, and start in a small way by yourself ? I'm sure you would succeed," said Isobel.

Joe looked at her for a minute with a face which had caught a gleam of her enthusiastic expression, then he laughed aloud.

" Can you see me in a little back parlour in Fossingham Street, with half a dozen tools and a plank of wood, setting up to revive hand-work and show the box trade the error of its ways ? No, thank you, Mrs. Hesketh. I'd rather smash on a big scale than succeed on a small one."

" You know I don't agree, Joe. One of my father's really beautiful attempts is worth a thousand of your machine-made modern boxes. But we've discussed this point over and over again. You always get the best of the argument, I admit, although you don't alter my opinion in the least."

" I know that's impossible when you've made up your mind, my dear. All I say is, if you're going to make a box at all, make a box the way a machine does it—

perfectly. I can pick out a fault in every single model your father sold, slight perhaps, but it's there."

"That's part of the charm, if you're right, for it resembles the irregularity of all natural objects. Even the most beautiful features, you know, would be found out of drawing by your machine-made standard, Joe."

"Oh, well, beautiful features and natural objects are not boxes. I'd like you to see the irregularity of business men's faces if we sent 'em goods of all shapes and size with lids that wouldn't fit."

He got to his feet and walked up and down the room. Isobel rested wearily in her chair, already beginning to make plans to suit the coming change in their lives. She was chiefly disturbed by the thought of her mother. Perhaps Cecilia, with her big house and servants, could take in Mrs. Erne. She could not have asked Laura. It was always easy to be frank with Cissy.

An idea flashed into her mind. Edward Roseglade and aunt Althea were living in Brittany, with no immediate prospect of returning home. Would it be possible to take their house for a while? Isobel mapped out the rooms, not forgetting to give one up for the storage of the Roseglade's treasures, safe from the little curious fingers and climbing feet of the Junior. She thought of improvements in the garden, and remembered aunt Althea's stories of the cheapness of the neighbourhood.

Joe stopped beside her, and, suddenly stooping down, kissed her hair.

"I expect you feel dumfounded, my poor darling!" he said; "But cheer up! It might be worse. We're both strong and well, and so's the boy."

"I wish you wouldn't forget that there's a baby now in the family," replied Isobel, smiling and holding him close for a minute; "I don't care what happens, with you to take care of us."

CHAPTER XXI

HOME

"How long have we been living in St. Mark's Square, Joe? Years and years and years!"

Isobel let her needlework drop upon her knees, looking into the green bushes and trees of the saint's oblong garden, as if she could see the years and years and years in their green shadows. It was a summer evening. They had the little garden to themselves.

"Not quite so long as that, my dear," observed her husband, as usual taking her literally; "Won't it be four years this autumn?"

"Yes."

"It's very lucky for us that the Roseglades seem to have settled down in Brittany, Belle."

"Very lucky."

"Though I shouldn't mind, in one way, if they suddenly wanted us to turn out," Hesketh went on; "I should be obliged to get another place if that happened. As it is, I'm getting so lazy that Heron House almost satisfies me."

"Why not?" said Isobel, studying him in her old earnest way.

"It's so small, my dear girl, and you've got to work so hard. Then look at the neighbourhood!"

"The house is quite big enough while the children are little. I'm used to the work, and what is the matter with the neighbourhood, Joe?"

"I can't exactly tell you," he answered, with a laugh; "You must ask Cecilia or my sisters. They think we are off the map. I'm tired of hearing Laura call you 'poor Isobel' whenever we meet."

"Really, Joe, we can't move away from a convenient house because Laura doesn't think the neighbourhood good enough," said his wife, laughing in her turn; "You

surprise me in many ways. You like to be independent, but I've so often heard you mention Lo's habit of talking about me as 'poor Isobel.' What does it matter?"

"I want to do as much for you as Welwyn and Reuben have done for their wives."

"You boy! Please don't imagine I'm envious of Cissy's diamonds or Laura's electric cooking stove."

"The other night when I called at the Welwyns," said Hesketh, "We had to talk about that stove for an hour. Arthur managed to drag himself away from the subject, but Laura simply couldn't."

"Yes, Lol does touch upon it," said Isobel, smiling affectionately; "But to return to the question of a new house. There are several to let in St. Mark's Square, if uncle Edward and aunt Althea want us to move. I thought there was a hint of it in the last letter."

"Then we'll go back to Bayswater, or Kensington. I'm not going to live in another of these old shanties. Haven't we been patching and repairing Heron House ever since we came? I know it's a low rent, but Roseglade had neglected everything in a shocking way."

"I'm sure you have enjoyed yourself thoroughly, Joe!" cried Isobel; "You've had the double pleasure of doing good jobs and grumbling the whole time."

Joe laughed at himself.

"If any other woman talked to me the way you do, Belle, I should say she was horridly disagreeable and didn't appreciate my good qualities."

"But you know that I do—such as they are."

"There you are again! Do you realize, my girl, that I've saved our firm from ruin and made it one of the best and most promising in the trade to-day? Have you forgotten how we nearly smashed four years ago when everything was against me? If I hadn't held on with both hands—and worked with both hands too—we should have gone under."

"I shall never forget it, Joe," said Isobel, seriously.

It was the first time he had spoken of the old struggle since the worst days were over.

"And what did I do it for?" Hesketh continued; "Not for my own sake, for I could have got a job at once—you remember that Smith and Abercrombie, the

acking case people at Hackney, came after me directly they heard we were on the rocks—and not for my own people. For you, Belle, only you. I was ashamed of failing before you."

"I know it was for me and the children."

"No, not even the children. My salary from Smith and Abercrombie would have kept the children all right. I thought wholly of you. What would you have said if I had shut up my own place and taken the pay of other men!"

"I should never have reproached you, dear," said Isobel, looking at him with a puzzled expression in her beautiful eyes; "I can't see that it makes so very much difference—except the money difference in the future, and I know you are not speaking of that—whether you work in the box trade for yourself or somebody else. In fact, if you had taken a situation you would have been spared much anxiety and labour."

"You can't see that it makes so very much difference?" Hesketh repeated, slowly; then he was silent for a while looking where she had looked, when they spoke of passing time, into the green shadows of the bushes and trees; "Perhaps you're right, Belle. But I thought *you* would understand that when a man who has been his own master—that isn't the point either. I thought you would understand that a resolution to succeed in one's object in life, whatever it may be, is the best gift a man can offer to the woman who holds him, body and soul, as I'm held by you——"

He stopped abruptly, with a quick gesture of putting away the hand she would have laid on his.

It was not the first time Isobel had seen with amazement that even her lightest touch, in such rare minutes of passion revealed, was more than he could bear with self-control.

It was a minute or two before he was able to turn to her again, half smiling.

"It's a little bit of a shock—don't you agree?—to find out that one's wife has missed the real meaning of one's efforts? However, it's too fine a point for discussion—subtle, to use one of your favourite words. I wonder how often I've surprised and hurt *you*."

"Dear Joe, I never meant——"

"I know that, Isobel. On the day two people wound each other deliberately and enjoy it, they ought to part. Love is dead when it comes to that."

A long pause.

"Isn't it amazing, Joe, when you come to think of it, how lightly and thoughtlessly you and I started out on the big adventure for two?"

"Well, we've had a good deal of fun," said Hesketh, who had recovered his usual manner.

"But you know we've made many errors and lived through many agitating discoveries about each other, now haven't we, Joe? And I suppose they're not all over yet."

"Exactly—that's marriage, my dear."

* * * * *

Isobel Hesketh's sisters had shown their sympathy, on hearing of her husband's business troubles, in characteristic words and deeds.

Cecilia was all affection, at once offering to lend Isobel money and trying to make Ben take an interest in Joe's affairs. Reuben went so far as to call at the box works in Little Orb Street and talk matters over. Their ideas, however, were so opposed that it was a relief to them both to end the interview. Joe was glad to be rid of Reuben, and Reuben did as much as any man could be expected to do (he told Cecilia) by giving his brother-in-law the best of good lunches in the city.

Laura, on hearing the news, immediately set out to visit Isobel. She bought a big bag of mixed biscuits for the Junior and a jar of preserved ginger for her sister, as a practical proof of her desire to succour them in their need—perhaps suggesting that they were in danger of starvation and could eat anything—and tempered her regrets with reproaches to poor Joe for not having gone into the Civil Service when he was young.

The G.P.O., said Laura in a striking mixed metaphor, was the anchor which buoyed up Arthur, herself and the children in the stormy sea of life.

Mrs. Erne was the only member of the family who

enefited, after her first shock, by the temporary collapse of the Heskeths. Cecilia offered a home to her mother, after Ben had been consulted and grudgingly given his consent.

"It's a good thing she's an invalid and has to stop in her own room," observed Cecilia's amiable husband; "You must make your mother comprehend, as far as I'm concerned, that I shall look upon that room as if it was the Continent."

"What do you mean, Ben?" asked Cissy.

"Why, she'll find I shall only have time to visit it once or twice a year."

Mrs. Erne was given a snug and sunny room in the Reubens' latest house, in Cardigan Court, S.W. It was proposed that Cecilia should do as Isobel had done, take care of the invalid herself with the help of one or another of the servants.

Mrs. Erne found, in less than a week, that her eldest daughter's idea of nursing was to arrange flowers, pour out the tea in a hurry, and chat to her for about five minutes before dinner. The servants, it is needless to say, looked upon the new and exacting inmate of their house as a trouble to be shifted from one pair of shoulders to another and ignored as much as possible.

Before Mrs. Erne had had time to become very miserable, however, Cecilia had advertised for a Companion, interviewed many unsuitable applicants, and engaged—"directly I clapped my eyes on her, Belle!"—a woman who might have been born, educated, widowed, and reduced in circumstances for the express purpose of filling the situation.

She was a capable person, but not too capable; placid in temper, and like a good machine for running smoothly if well oiled. Something of a flatterer and with a touch of the toady, "Nurse" (as Mrs. Erne called this treasure) adapted herself to the patient from the first day they met. She never said (as Cecilia did) that Mrs. Erne ought to get up when she wanted to stop in bed; or smiled (as Isobel did) when the invalid deplored her wretched appetite; or laughed (as Laura did) because she put on all her jewellery to impress the doctor.

In short, Mrs. Erne felt that somebody "understood"

her at last, and settled down to enjoy poor health for the remainder of her life.

* * * * *

Edward and Althea Roseglade returned to London at the beginning of the fifth year of the Heskeths' occupation of their house.

Joe was glad to leave the old place, Isobel was sorry. Their new home was in Hampstead, in the very road where Cecilia had lived when she was first married, but at the other end where the houses were smaller and newly built.

"I hope I shall never have to move again in this world!" said Hesketh, solemnly, at the end of the day when the family left St. Mark's Square.

"I always knew we should strike the one wet day in September," observed Isobel, looking out of her new windows at her new, rain-drenched garden.

They were resting from their labours. The three children—the Junior, little Celia and the one-year-old baby—were in bed. The two servants were entertaining two helpers in the kitchen. The house was fairly straight, but everything looked unfamiliar and cheerless.

"There's no doubt it's a much better house than we ever thought to possess again, Belle, but I can't say I feel at home in it," said Hesketh, looking gloomily from floor to ceiling; "I agree with Celia that this room 'mells o' paint, and I don't like it."

"Let us try the dining room, Joe."

So they went into the dining room.

"It's better—decidedly better," said Hesketh; "Why is a dining room generally the most cheery room in a house?"

"It must be association of ideas," replied Isobel, smiling; "I don't agree with you though, for I think the nursery is the only pleasant room in this house."

"I say, Belle! Don't make up your mind to detest the place," he protested; "As I told you just now, we can't move again. Here we are, my dear, and here we stop."

Hesketh threw himself into an easy chair, lighted a

cigar, and settled comfortably down as if he meant his words to be taken literally. Isobel perched on the edge of the table near him, swinging her feet.

She still looked young, like a slip of a girl at a first glance, being one of those fortunate women who keep their youth in fine outline and delicacy of features. Observant eyes, nevertheless, could see that experience had lined her once smooth forehead, strengthened, perhaps a little hardened, the curve of her mouth, taught her decision, and driven all the vague dreams of early years into the silence of long forgotten things.

* * * * *

Had Isobel ever yearned for Lulwater since her marriage? Did she ever think of it now, when all desires and hopes of her life rippled together, like mountain streams seeking the broad waters of a lake, into the utter love of her children?

Rarely and more rarely it flashed into her remembrance—perhaps when she saw the gleam of summer rain on the leaves of an ash tree; perhaps at the faint scent of a wild flower; perhaps at the sound of little waves of the sea on a still August day.

Even then the vision was gone as quickly as it came—a mirage in the mind of the rugged fells, and the rolling mist, the ferns and mosses on the old garden wall of Lulworth House.

* * * * *

Isobel sat beside her husband, in the dining room of their new house, for a long time in silence.

He smoked placidly, and she knew by his intent expression that he was thinking of his box works. His father had definitely retired. Joe was both Hesketh and Son, representing the latter word until such time as the little Junior would be old enough to go into business.

Isobel's gaze wandered about the room, generally approving, but very critical of details. How much better she liked the Roseglades' old sticks than her own new furniture! It was a comfortable house, she acknowledged; it could be made a beautiful house. Then she remembered

that her baby would think of it all his life as his first home. The Junior and Celia associated that word with the house in St. Mark's Square.

She pictured her own first home, in Fossingham Street, with her mother doing the domestic work in a shabby black velvet dress, with a train dragging after her over the dusty floor; her father painting his boxes under a gas-jet that blackened the low ceiling; Cissy decking her small person with old finery of Mrs. Erne's in front of the looking glass; Laura, with her blue eyes and tight curls, dusting the chairs with her pinafore; herself, sprinkling water out of a little watering can over a weedy geranium and a limp daisy in the yard.

"I'm so glad we have a garden, Joe!" exclaimed Isobel, with such emphasis that it startled him.

"So am I. I've been used to a garden of some sort since I was a boy. This one isn't much bigger than a bath towel, is it?" he answered.

"Big enough for each child to have its own little plot. You like a garden because you've always had one. I like it because I never did . . . Joe! Do you realize that while this is only a new house in Hampstead to you and me, it will be the centre of their little world to the kiddies?"

"I don't like the distinction, my dear," said Hesketh; "It is the centre of the world to me, too. Home! It means more to us in a way than it does to them. They'll grow up and leave it. We'll grow down to stop in it. Home! Our home."

He repeated the word with a depth of tenderness in his voice that Isobel could never hear with indifference. It was the voice of his early love for her, but softened and more temperate.

"Ah! You're not speaking of the four walls, dear," she said; "You mean the spirit of home."

"True, but a man's house and everything he possesses in it are part of the spirit, d'you see, Belle? They represent his work and reward."

"Doesn't the spirit of home rather represent loyalty and unselfishness and daily happiness—in a word, love?" she asked.

"Yes, and in another word—Isobel," replied Hesketh.

It was so quietly said, with such conviction, that his wife was surprised and touched to the quick.

For a minute she seemed to see, not the impatient lover of her girlhood, or the exacting husband of so many years, but a man whom she could love as women rarely love—her other self—the long lost companion from a celestial sphere she had once known and forgotten.

Not a word of this momentary sensation of unutterable joy passed her lips. He would neither have cared, nor attempted, to understand such a fleeting thought, gone as it came, like a flash of lightning from the heavens to the dark earth.

Very soon they were talking of the dear, trivial, important facts of their daily life. Isobel's divine minute had passed, but no revelation of love or beauty comes to leave us quite the same.

CHAPTER XXII

GATHERING THREADS TOGETHER

It seemed to Isobel Hesketh, as the long days and the short years passed, that she gathered into her hands the interwoven threads of many lives.

First and before all were the bright colours of her children's little deeds, words and thoughts. Then the strong, unwavering lines of her husband's work and ambition; the gay tinsel and gold ribbon of Cecilia's pleasures and emotions; the simple untwisted cords which bound her sister Laura, Arthur Welwyn and their boys and girls together.

The quarrel with Laura of so many years had ended more suddenly than it began. They had insensibly changed to each other. Laura tried not to criticize Isobel's management of her house and family, but did it all the more because she seldom expressed any disapproval in words. Isobel tried to avoid suspecting that Laura's polite silence was broken at her expense to any and every mutual friend.

They were both too sensible to wilfully misjudge one another, like a couple of schoolgirls, but long estrangement had lessened their perception for good points.

One day, a little while after the Heskeths had moved into their Hampstead house, Isobel took her two elder children to spend the afternoon with the younger Welwyns.

Laura and her family were in mourning for old Mrs. Welwyn. It was characteristic of Lol to declare that she was positively lost without the advice and company of dear grandmama, telling everybody—and believing it too—that the old lady had been her right hand since the happy day when they decided to live in the same house.

She genuinely grieved for her mother-in-law at the time of the funeral, dutifully mentioned her at intervals

or some weeks afterwards, and had her photograph enlarged to hang up in the dining room.

"It's so homely and beautiful, when one looks up from carving, to see dear grandmama's face smiling from the wall, and I've always wanted a picture to match 'The Monarch of the Glen' on the other side of the dumb-waiter," said Laura.

It was at the end of a strenuous afternoon, romping with the children, that the most trifling incident in the world swept away the shadow of the long quarrel.

The Junior and little Celia were waiting for their mother in the hall, with their cousins. Isobel was standing by the drawing room door, saying a few last words to her sister, who sat by the fire.

Isobel wore a frieze coat fastened across the chest by a couple of clasps on the left shoulder. She tried, while she talked, to put them together, fidgeting until Laura could not bear it any longer.

"Here! Let me do up your coat for you, Isobel," she said, and crossed the room.

The younger sister dropped her hands to her sides and turned her shoulder. Instead of instantly nicking the clasps, as she expected, Laura held them apart. It struck Isobel, as they stood so close together, that there was something very restful and nobly maternal in Laura's capable soft hands, big figure, and mild forehead.

"I used to fasten your pinafore, and plait your pretty hair, before Cissy took you in hand and pushed me on one side," said Laura, thoughtfully; "You were very helpless when you were a little child, Belle."

They suddenly looked into each other's eyes.

Isobel felt the stab of poignant memory. Laura's habitual expression of bland self-satisfaction broke into quivering lines that made her look old and very tender.

"Oh, Lol!" exclaimed Isobel; "I'm sorry—I'm sorry—how could I be so unkind to my old Lol—how could I?—How could I?—"

She clasped her arms round Laura's neck and kissed her again and again.

"There! There! You little silly!" whispered Laura; "It was my fault. I've always told the children not to let the sun set on their anger—I'm a fine one to talk!

Don't, dearest—don't take it so much to heart . . . Belle dear, don't! . . . Well, whoever made this coat in such an awkward fashion ought to go out of business . . . Indeed, it was my fault, dear . . . put your hat straight, and give me another kiss. There! My own Belle! All right now?"

"Yes—yes—thank you, Lol."

* * * * *

Their friends could see little change in Edward and Althea Roseglade, when they returned to London, after five years in Brittany.

They walked back into Heron House, in St. Mark's Square, as casually as they had walked out of it. Aunt Althea was duly impressed by, and very grateful for, Joe Hesketh's many repairs and improvements. Roseglade either took them as a matter of course, or failed to notice what had been done.

"I see that Joe has put in some gorgeous new ramblers," was the only remark he made until he had been coached by Althea to thank their "good old sober 'and."

Isobel and her husband were both attached to "Uncle Ned," and rivalled each other in admiration of aunt Althea.

"If ever aunt Althea chooses to leave off being young, won't she make a grand old lady?" said Joe, in her presence, one day at Heron House.

"Do you know that I'm sixty, Joe? At least, that is my official age at present," she replied.

"What does that mean?" asked Isobel.

"Edward settled long ago that we should have the same official age to save trouble when relations and old friends, who are often so unnecessarily anxious to fix dates, asked how old we were. So we remained at thirty-five for quite a long time, then we were forty for about a year, then fifty, and as I had a birthday last month we both jumped to sixty."

"I think we'll stop at sixty till we're a hundred," said Roseglade; "It's such a reasonable age, between the fellows with 'eyes severe' and the 'slipper'd pantaloons.'"

"What a long time it must be since you met uncle Ned!" said Isobel.

"Before you were born or thought of, my pet."

The words awakened old memories of her first knowledge of Althea in Isobel's mind, followed by the vague scandal and the comedy of Chertsey gran'ma's will.

Later in the evening, when they were alone, she ventured to speak to Althea on the subject they had never before mentioned to each other, but so diffidently that her aunt was puzzled for a few seconds. Then she gave a laugh, and put an arm round the younger woman's shoulders in her old caressing way.

"My dear child, if ever there was a mystery about Edward and me, surely it was dispelled years ago? I used to think that my nieces were singularly incurious not to ask me the direct question:—'Are you Mrs. Roseglade *de facto*, or *de jure*, or both?'"

"Oh, aunt Althea! How could three young girls say such a thing?"

"Well, not you or Laura perhaps, but Cissy was the kind of little person to take a great interest in romance. Romance!" Althea repeated the word with a peculiar smile; "I'm afraid that isn't the expression that any of our dear relations would use. What do you think yourself, Belle? Do you look upon Edward and me as a married couple?"

"Of course I do, aunt Althea."

"Then I'll tell you the truth. We have been really married for some years now. Exact dates are unnecessary, as I said a while ago when we were talking about age. I first met Edward in America, although he is an Englishman. He was then a married man, recently separated, but not divorced, from his wife. He and I were soon faced by one of the oldest problems, and you know how we solved it. Ancient history, Belle, ancient history!"

She tapped Isobel's hand with her fingers for a minute, then she sighed and turned her still lustrous eyes upon her niece's face.

"We believed and hoped that Mrs. Roseglade—isn't it strange, Belle, that those two words, 'Mrs. Roseglade,' so often recall Edward's first wife to my mind though

I've heard them addressed to myself for over thirty years?—well, we hoped Mrs. Roseglade would seize the opportunity to regain her own freedom, by giving Edward his, especially as she was a young and attractive woman. We were mistaken. It was strange, for she was very broad-minded and tolerant. Do you know, I met her once at an hotel, and we had a long intimate talk before discovering each other's identity."

"Oh, aunt Althea!"

"If I had been in Edward's place I should have loved that woman—but I'm talking nonsense. So, you see, it was not until Mrs. Roseglade's death that we could be legally married."

"I wonder, after so many years, that you cared——" began Isobel, and stopped.

"I'm not surprised at what you are thinking," replied aunt Althea, calmly; "It's a natural question, but if you had taken the step in youth that I took—of my own accord, I know,—I think you would understand my desire for 'the slightly belated ceremony,' as Ned called it. Perhaps you agree with him that it was hardly necessary?"

"You trusted each other and are both so good," said Isobel; "You seem only to care for beautiful and virtuous things. You *were* married, without any ceremony, aunt Althea."

"Dear Belle!"—Althea kissed her cheek—"Doesn't it occur to you that Edward and I may be as we are—though not half so wonderful as you imagine—in spite of our early experience, not because of it? There's a big difference in that, my dear. As we should have married had it been possible in youth, when the spiritual tie was so interwoven with the physical that we couldn't divide them, so we were willing to marry in age when the absorption of one in one had changed to a wider love and deeper comradeship."

"Then you think we ought to abide by conventions and other people's opinion?"

"Marriage is more than convention, it seems to me, Belle. It is a sacred covenant, however its present form may need reforming and alteration. As for other people's opinion—well, I'm more humble than I used

to be. I'm obliged to admit that those tiresome 'other people' are sometimes right and I'm wrong."

Isobel was silent for a minute. Then she asked the vital question.

"Have you ever regretted solving the old problem in the way you did?"

"No! I have never regretted it," replied Althea; "At the same time, I wouldn't advise any other woman to follow my example. You'll find in real life—not in novels, my dear—that when two people, who have any love for each other worthy of the name, don't get married it isn't for the sake of being unconventional, or free, or brave, but for the much simpler reason that there's an unsurmountable obstacle."

"Have you really so much faith in this worldly old world, aunt Althea?"

"Yes, but don't forget I'm speaking of men and women who mean to be true to each other and make something of a home together. If they don't get married, you mark my words, there's another wife, or another husband, in the background."

Aunt Althea was silent again for thoughtful minutes, before she repeated with her usual brisk emphasis:—

"Ancient history, Belle! Edward and I hardly ever speak of it. There are so many things much more interesting than one's own past."

"One more question, aunt Althea. How did the Erne family, poor old great-uncle Thomas, the Rev Bob and the rest of them, know anything about your affairs while you were in America?"

She hesitated before replying.

"I wrote to my brother Henry, for he was always my best friend. Your father may have told your mother, Belle, and your mother may have dropped a hint, perhaps unintentionally, to somebody else. I never troubled to find out, or to defend myself."

"You have been a happy woman, in spite of everything, aunt Althea?"

"I have been very happy, I am, and I shall be. If there is another world Edward and I will be sure to find each other; if not, we shall sleep in peace at the end of our long day of life."

Ben Reuben, as time went on, seemed to change from a young man to an old one with few perceptible years of middle age. His fine, roving eyes grew small and sunken, his skin veiny, his hands nervous, his step shuffling. He was like the grandfather of his son.

Cecilia, handsome and upright as ever, looked down on his bald head when he stood beside her. Reuben had become abjectly dependent on his wife's courage to uphold his own. He was ill and afraid of death, hugging his life in a weakening clutch, like a dotard with an ill-used mistress who struggles to escape.

Cecilia bore with him as she had never borne with him before. She listened patiently to his grievances, smiling when he was in a good mood, appearing pained when he was suffering, while saving herself from his society as much as she could by the engagement of two trained nurses.

The doctors did not see the necessity for two trained nurses, but if it would relieve Mrs. Reuben's affectionate anxiety over her dear husband—and so on and so on.

The boy, Norman Reuben, was summoned home from school. Ben's old partner, Mr. Dubosc, was a constant visitor to the invalid. Laura Welwyn sent him so much home made jelly that the servants were quite tired of it. Lol enclosed little notes in the packets entreating Cissy, in her great anxiety, to keep up her spirits and her appetite.

Ben looked at Isobel, when she went to see him, with something of the insolent admiration and curiosity of the far-away night of the burned letters. He pressed her hand and whispered that her little confidences were safe with her poor old brother.

Mrs. Erne, from her own room in another part of the house, sent doleful messages (which her discreet attendant edited before delivering) to Cecilia and the patient. Mrs. Erne at once expected the worst when other people were ill, and, although she declared herself on occasion to be at death's door, invariably spoke as if she would be sure to outlive her family and friends.

"When all those whom I love are dead, Nurse, however shall I bear it?" was a favourite problem she set her companion to solve.

Mrs. Erne took a gruesome interest in any details of her son-in-law's illness that she could gather and told her few callers, with gloomy pride, that poor Ben was suffering from a complication of shocking diseases.

After lingering so long that the members of his household thought, and whispered among themselves, that he had given them a false hope, Ben Reuben died suddenly when he was alone with one of the nurses.

He had just been saying that he felt better, and made a little joke about a glass of champagne. He lifted his head to see whether she was smiling, and dropped back upon his pillows—dead.

* * * * *

“He had a gift for making money; he was proud of his son, and fond of his wife, at the times when he didn't happen to be fond of somebody else. He was generous to rich friends and contemptuous of poor ones. He once brought an old Jewish beggar home and gave him a meal and twenty pounds.”

Such was Ben Reuben's epitaph, spoken by Cecilia.

* * * * *

Joe and Isobel Hesketh, in the year of the sixteenth anniversary of their wedding, were able to buy the house at Hampstead. The freehold possession of his London home was one of the milestones it was Hesketh's ambition to pass on the road of life. He had no intention of retiring, however, for there was too much money to be picked up and stored in his boxes for him to weary of the hard journey.

Isobel had long abandoned the idea of taking an active share in his work. She had hoped, as their children grew older, to learn something of the business which absorbed her husband's mind, perhaps make friends with the men he employed, or help him, but there was an unsuspected strain of pride, or convention, in his character which thwarted her at every turn. He could not understand her reasons. That a woman of tact and good sense, as he knew her to be, should wish to “inter-

fere" in his affairs both surprised and annoyed him. It was the cause of friction between them, the old clash of widely differing personalities revived in new circumstances.

Isobel gave way, and, although Joe rewarded her by a return to the geniality and boyish good humour that she loved in him, he had no idea of the struggle it had cost her. She was never jealous of the friends he made, or the time he spent away from home, but it was many years before she would admit to herself that in the one thing on earth he loved, next to herself and his children—his work—Joe could do very well without her.

So it was that one strong thread in her life, which she believed would have bound them closer together, was definitely broken. She never went to Little Orb Street, except by special invitation, and her husband rarely spoke of his trade at home.

There was a touch of irony in the fact that Henry Erne's boxes, regarded with a small amount of admiration and a great deal of patronage by Hesketh and Son, have been long acknowledged as works of art and highly valued by collectors of beautiful objects.

Cecilia Reuben recently gave a bigger sum of money for a set of the marigold design than her father could have earned, at Fossingham Street, by a month's work.

* * * * *

Isobel's fourth and last child was born at Hampstead, lived for nearly three years, and died suddenly. The Junior and Cecilia understood and were sorry; their little brother wondered and soon forgot.

"I'm afraid you'll want to go away from this house, Belle," said Joe Hesketh, after a while; "Living here will always remind you of your loss."

"I shall never be really happy in any other place, dear," she answered; "Do you think I want to forget? I often fancy I hear her little, uneven footsteps, or see her shadow as she runs out into the garden. When the children are playing I think—I feel sure—she is with them. No other home could be as dear to me as this with all its memories, all its joys, all its sorrows."

CHAPTER XXIII

LULWATER

It was the last day of September in the present year.

A gusty wind swept over the lake at Lulwater; scudding, broken clouds darkened the blue sky and hid the mountain peaks. Gorse and grass, ferns and mosses of the lovely, lonely fells were already steeped in the colour of autumn's wine. A slanting, swift rain was falling.

The so-called gondola puffed and hurried on her first journey of the morning. So she had puffed and hurried from end to end of the lake since the beginning of May. Her season was nearly over. From October until April she would lie at her moorings, leaving the water in peace and the air free from the trail of blackening smoke.

A private or public motor could be seen now and again, through the still leafy trees, skimming along the hilly roads on either side of the lake. There were a few rowing boats, pulled by vigorous young men, or girls, as if they were training for a race.

All the human beings within view seemed so anxious to get away from Lulwater that one might have questioned why they came. Only the birds floating in the air, the sheep at pasture in the wind-swept fields, and a few workmen trudging the highway, were leisurely indifferent to the passing of time.

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The little stony harbour of Lulworth House had been enlarged by the nephew of Mr. Edwin Clare, who lived with his uncle and aunt, and, as future owner of the estate, had already adapted the whole place to his modern needs.

The house was twice its original size, when Godfrey Strang had bought it, for the nephew was married and had a big family of children. He used a steam launch on the lake, a car on the road. His boys rode motor cycles. His wife found the place insufferably dull unless she had a crowd of visitors. His girls longed to live in London. They were all charming people to meet at a party once—and it is doubtful if one of the family had ever read through a book by Godfrey Strang.

Time had dealt kindly with Mrs. Clare and her husband. She was still pretty, and vague, and perpetually reminiscent of her famous brother. Edwin could no longer work in his garden. He read *The Times* all the morning, passed the afternoon very pleasantly between novels and naps, and played the piano after dinner as of old.

There were two new hotels built in the village, and many fine houses in the surrounding district. All the tourists, who wish to see the English lakes thoroughly, spend a couple of hours at Lulwater on their way to bigger places—a trip on the gondola, a glimpse at Lulworth House, Strang's grave, the old church, Lulwater Ghyll, lunch—oh, yes, it cannot be done really well under two hours, but that means (most important) that one doesn't have to hurry over his meal.

With all this, Lulwater to-day is the Lulwater of thirty years ago in the wonder of its changeless hills and eternal skies, the deep mirror of its lake at morn, the music of its mountain streams, the winds that battle with its lofty firs and shake the harebells on their fairy stems.

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A woman stood on a weedy strip of shore, on the opposite side of the lake to Lulworth House. It was Isobel Hesketh, alone. Behind her was a sloping bank, hiding the road. Before her was a long, curving line of ruffled water.

When she arrived at Lulwater, on the previous night, all the hills and fields were wrapped in mist, and the lake had looked like tarnished steel, indefinite, mysterious.

Her eyes searched the opposite shore, at first vainly, for the house she thought to remember so well. She

felt, not so much as if it was a dream, in spite of a certain sense of unreality, but as if she had come back to the scene of another life. It was all familiar. It was all strange. London—her home—her husband—her sons and daughter—seemed to be so far away that they lived only in memory.

Suddenly, as if in very truth it had grown out of the landscape by the strength of her thoughts, Isobel recognised Lulworth House. She hardly noticed, when it was once found, the added wings or buildings behind it.

Lulworth House—at last!—half hidden by the trees that had been planted since Strang's death, but she could see the top of the wall, between the field and the road, which they had always climbed to make a short cut to the lake. There was the little harbour—she saw no change at such a distance—overhung by the branches of a larch. Her keen eyes could even make out a dark shape beneath them; surely a boat drawn high upon the stones. Perhaps it was the old Arrow—the Argo—of her youth's adventure.

So Isobel stood immovable for a long time, close to the rippling water. She looked across the lake—across thirty years—to the home of Godfrey Strang. It was there she had lived for the brightest hour in the morning of life; it was there she had listened to the voice of Nature in living rills and murmuring leaves; it was there she had first awakened to a joy in poetry and beauty; it was there she had loved with a heart as pure as it was deep and silent.

For the first time for many, many years she longed intensely for Strang; she longed for his living presence, his living voice, his living touch. Her memory quickened to a sense of pain.

It was too late! She had found her way back to Lulwater—too late.

The aching desire to return which had been baffled so often, at the time she lived in Fossingham Street, had gradually given place to other longings, many gratified, some forgotten.

She felt like a traveller in a strange land. What was Lulwater without Godfrey Strang? Who was Isobel Hesketh? A woman as different from the girl named

Isobel Erne as this cold September day from the sunshine of June.

She turned from the lake, climbed the sloping bank, and listlessly walked along the highroad, not caring whither it led.

The rain had ceased and the sky brightened at mid-day. Isobel had wandered far, but returned to within half a mile of Lulworth House. She had reached one of the little promontories where Strang had often pulled ashore and they had landed to read, or sketch, or simply talk.

There were a few small trees, wind-tossed and gleaming wet ; bushes of hips and haws ; a cluster of wild flowers ; little reeds growing among the sedgy grass. A robin, perched on a low bough, trilled his merry note so near to Isobel that she could see the ruffle of his feathers in the air and the circle of his bright eye. She remembered listening to a robin, on her last morning at Lulworth House, on her way to the harbour all alone.

The impulse to leave at once, which had come to her in the first hour of sadness, had now passed. She was to join her husband in Cumberland in ten days. He would be hurt and disappointed if his plans were altered. Business kept him in town till then and he had guessed, with a quickness of sympathy that was so rare it still surprised her, that Isobel would rather be alone at Lulwater.

The days would soon pass. She stooped and gathered a handful of red leaves to lay upon Strang's grave.

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Summer lingered at Lulwater.

Isobel Hesketh, a week later, sat on the lawn of the hotel at the head of the lake, her usually busy hands at rest, her eyes half closed, her mind and body in perfect repose.

She had not made friends with the other visitors, though many had looked at her with interest, a few with admiration. Her face and manner were too gentle for pride ; she was neither discourteous nor indifferent, but aloof from her fellows.

She had walked and rowed alone, breakfasting early and

returning late. This was the first day she had chosen to spend an afternoon in the garden of the hotel.

* * * * *

Isobel is thinking of her two boys and her pretty Celia. She had thought of them very seldom at Lulwater, oddly enough, although the little child she had lost often seemed to be close to her. More than once she had stood still at the edge of a mountain mere, or alone among the faded ferns and heather, so possessed by a belief in the child's sudden presence that she almost felt a little hand touch her own and saw the gleam of a little form running towards her.

Isobel thinks of her husband, sitting in his office at this hour, in the new and important factory of Hesketh and Son, as different from their works in Little Orb Street as a big trunk from a match box. Joe would be looking harassed and irritable, she knows, longing for his holiday. She sees his trick of rubbing his chin and fidgeting in his chair; but his face clears when the Junior comes into the room. The dear, reliable Junior, pride of his father's heart, born to be a good man of business.

Perhaps it is inevitable that having one son who possesses all the virtues (Joe declares) the Heskeths' younger boy should resemble his grandfather, poor Henry Erne, in a thorough dislike of machine-made boxes.

If Joe privately rates him as half a fool, Isobel believes he is wholly a genius. Time may prove that they are both a little right and a little wrong.

Celia is a living joy, as brilliant as her aunt Cecilia when she was a girl, and—to quote her aunt Laura—much more amenable to reason.

When Isobel's thoughts flash to Cecilia she sees her in finer surroundings than even Ben Reuben had been able to afford.

Cecilia is still handsome, and still looks so young that only Laura and her enemies dare to mention her real age. She adores her son, the ill-named Norman, in spite of the fact that he has inherited nearly all the leading characteristics (except the gift for making money) of his lamented father. Fortunately for Norman his mother is very rich,

but fortunately for her the managing director of Reuben and Dubosc, Wine Merchants, keeps a guiding hand on her purse-strings.

Cecilia is married to the gallant Dubosc. He had always thought her too young and beautiful for Reuben. He still thinks her beautiful, but not too young for himself. Cissy appears to be very happy. Isobel pictures her, on her return from her honeymoon with her second husband, standing in the big drawing room of her big new house. A jewel in a jewel-case.

"Not a bad ending for a shabby girl, with no fortune but her face, who sold little home-made boxes at a shop in Fossingham Street, is it, Belle?" said Cecilia.

Isobel remembers her laugh of triumph, then the change in her face to the old love, the old loyalty, the old rush of gratitude.

"Belle, I shouldn't care to live, if I had become the richest woman in London, without you. There is a sacred place in my heart, unknown to everybody else in the world, and you are there."

—As for Cecilia's husband, he is the most ardent of her admirers, the most amusing of her companions. She has been known to confess, to intimate friends, that she is quite in love with her gallant Dubosc.

Isobel smiles as her thoughts pass on to the Welwyns. Arthur has reached the goal of his middle age. He has retired on a good pension, and the G.P.O. has to get on as well as it can without him.

The eldest daughter of the house of Welwyn is married exceedingly well, and Laura is inordinately proud of being a grandmother. Three of her four sons, Isobel's Junior, and Cecilia's Norman, were all in the army, at some time or another, during the late war. The Junior was severely wounded, but has recovered; Norman Reuben did not see active service; Laura's Percy, to everybody's surprise, was mentioned in dispatches and given the D.S.O. Of the four mild, home-loving Welwyn boys—Arthur the second, Clarence, Percy and Cecil—he is perhaps the mildest and most reserved.

Mrs. Erne lived for so many years, after she had given herself up, that even her discreet and devoted Nurse was amazed. She did not die, in fact, until she was thoroughly

tired of living, and, if she could have returned to her comfortable quarters after a little change in another sphere, no doubt she would have been happy as a poor invalid for half a century more.

Franklin Osborne—but Isobel did not give a thought to him as she sat in the garden at Lulwater—was never seen again in Fossingham Street.

He had not wished to marry until he met Isobel, and gave up the idea when he lost her. His flat is charming, his housekeeper excellent. Insignificant in character, but good-looking, rich and agreeable, he has no lack of friends, especially among women.

The time came when he thought of Cecilia Reuben as an enchantress who had nearly ruined his life and her own, and her sister Isobel as a heartless coquette.

Sometimes he wonders whether Cecilia has destroyed the letters he had been fool enough to write to her; sometimes he wonders why Isobel had turned against him, but he never imagines that they have confided in each other.

In brief, Osborne is a base and contemptible man, on whom the elder sister had blindly squandered the passion of her youth and unhappiness, and the younger had never understood.

Aunt Althea had died in the spring of the year Isobel returned to the lakes. Her bright and brave spirit had passed from life, while she was sleeping, at the end of a particularly happy day spent in the garden at Heron House.

Edward Roseglade is still strong and vigorous in his grand old age.

He sometimes speaks of Althea as if she was still with him, and always as if they will meet again in a very little while. He lives in St. Mark's Square, spending much of his time with the Heskeths, beloved by them all, and he often calls Joe his "sober 'and."

* * * * *

Isobel had not been to Lulworth House. Mrs. Clare was away from home. She had met Edwin Clare, who remembered her very well, and assured her several times

that she had been a very pretty girl, especially in her little green frock, when she wore an ivy wreath.

They spoke of Strang, of course, and Mr. Clare described his death from heart failure after a long illness. She had read all the details in the newspapers when it happened, but it was so different to hear them from the lips of a man who had loved him.

Edwin Clare held her hand in a long, affectionate grasp when they were about to part.

"Do you know, Mrs. Hesketh," he said, "Godfrey once told me you were the most beautiful and mysterious girl he had ever met. Perhaps the mystery has gone—I could never see it—but the other quality remains."

He made her a stiff, old-fashioned bow, pressed her hand again, and walked away. Isobel smiled to herself at the little compliment and the whimsical way it was spoken. Then, for no accountable reason, she found that her eyes were full of tears.

* * * * *

It was Isobel's last morning at Lulwater.

She left her room in the hotel while the sky was still rosy with the clouds of sunrise. The air was fresh and filled with the promise of a perfect September day. The mist was rolling across the mountains, leaving their peaks clear cut and dark against the fading, pearly colours of dawn.

Isobel went down to the lake. A boatman was standing on the shore at the place where a row of boats to be hired were lying upon the stones. She had spoken to him on the previous evening and a boat was ready.

He led the way along the jetty, gave her his hand to step in, and pushed her gently off. After watching the strange lady slip her oars over the pins and start to row across the lake, he turned and walked as leisurely back to his cottage in the distance as if the day's work was over before it had begun.

Isobel was alone. The gondola was quietly at her moorings; there were no people astir at such an early hour.

She rowed slowly in the direction of Lulworth House, breaking and breaking again the faultless mirror of the

water at every stroke. When the boat was level with the entrance to the little harbour, where she could see the old Arrow, Isobel leaned upon her oars and her spirit wandered far into the twilight land of the past.

She did not know that Edward Roseglade, dearest of all her friends, had once said to his wife that Strang was the man to love and be loved by Isobel Erne, if his age and her youth—naturally and inevitably—had not kept them apart. She thought of it herself, not for the first time, but with no idle regret nor foolish sentimentality.

Her marriage with Joe Hesketh was like a strong rock in its reality; her remembrance of Godfrey Strang was like a ripple that passed over the water—she knew not whither it came, but saw it break and vanish as it touched the shore.

She thought long of Hesketh's love and her own, unchanged in its loyalty through the years, widened by time, tempered by all the dear, familiar events and feelings of human experience. The ordinary pleasures of life, the ordinary sorrows of life, bound them together, happy in their home, their children, their knowledge of each other's truth and sincerity.

* * * * *

Isobel rowed on and on. In a few hours she would be gone. The lake and the fells would know her no more. At first she had remembered so little, but now she realized how deeply her mind, heart and eyes had been absorbed by the beauty of Lulwater. She knew it better, after thirty years, than the streets which surrounded her London home . . .

The boat was level with the little promontory half a mile below Lulworth House. Once more, and for the last time, Isobel leaned on her oars and looked towards the shore.

She suddenly thought there was the figure of a man, standing in the flickering lights and shadows of gently waving boughs, looking across the lake.

Her heart leapt and quickened its beat. She hung forward, trembling, but unafraid—rapt in utter joy at the momentary illusion—for it looked like Godfrey Strang

with hand upraised, beckoning to her, as she had seen him on her last morning at Lulwater before they parted. She heard the echo of his voice :—

“ Whenever you come back, my darling, I will be here to meet you. Look for me on the shores of the lake.”

Her emotion was ineffable, never to be repeated, never to be forgotten

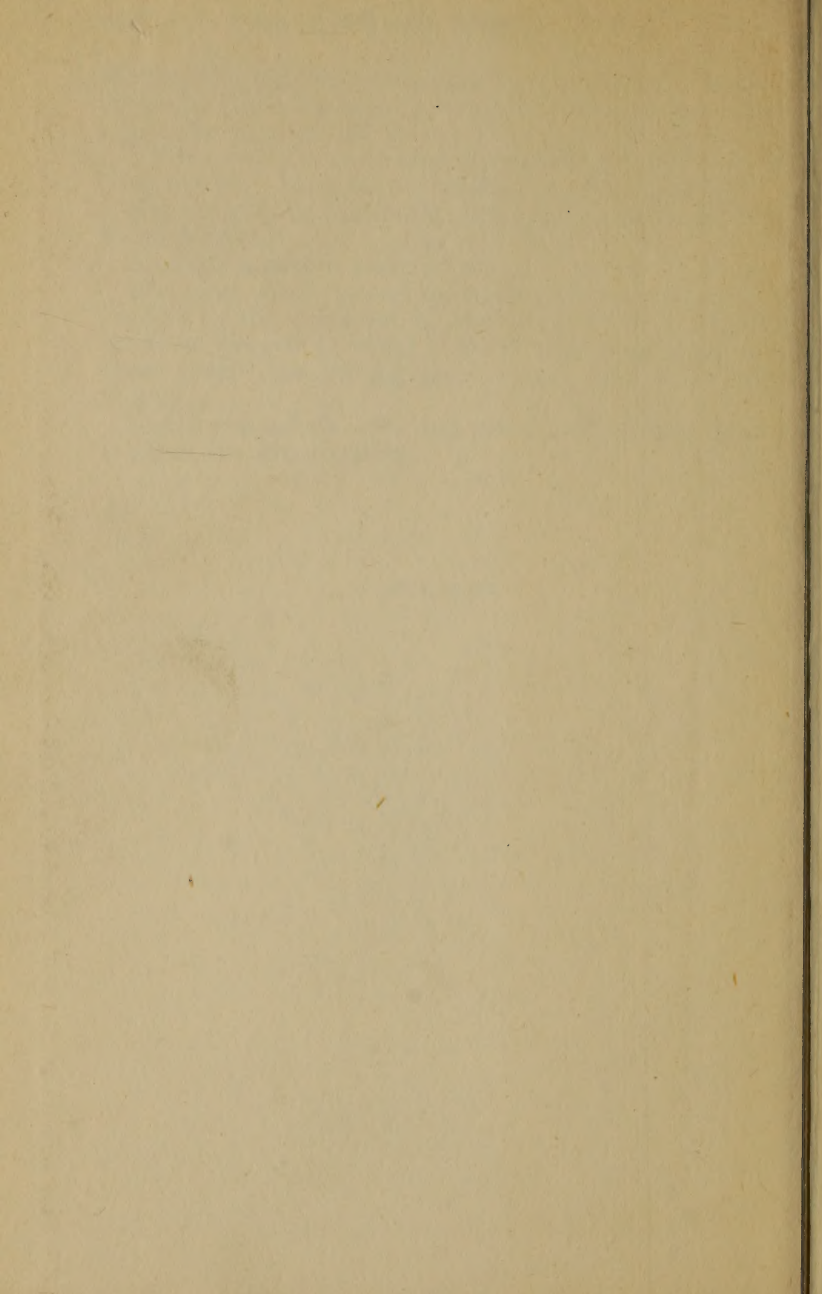
A cloud passed in front of the sun.

The west wind sprang up, rushed over the lake, and swirled in the branches of the trees. The lights and shadows merged together. There was nothing on the shore except the waving grass, stones, and a few wild flowers.

Isobel grasped the oars and rowed, with a firm stroke, towards the distant jetty.

THE END

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